EVERY winter 1.5 million Brits fly off to Florida. Most stay in hotels but many now own or rent condos or manufactured homes.

Jennifer Tobin is President of Federation of Manufactured Home Owners (FMO) Conversion Services, a subsidiary of the Federation of Manufactured Home Owners of Florida. Jennifer says that during the January—April “high season” she gives talks at hundreds of manufactured home parks about why the residents should be buying the park as a co-op.

At almost every park she hears British accents. Were it not for the tropical climate and palm trees, many of the British Snowbirds must wonder when they hear the word ‘co-op’ if they’ve left home.

Given its vacation status, Florida is the US leader in manufactured home communities. Around 5,500 parks in Florida are home to more than 1.2 million manufactured homes and about three million people. Manufactured home communities are an essential part of the housing supply in the sunshine state.

On the rise in Florida’s parks is the conversion from rental to resident ownership. Today, there are nearly 700 resident-owned parks in Florida. Most of these parks are owned by a co-operative with each home owner being a member. There are more than 160,000 homes serving over 400,000 people in the co-op parks.

When searching for “resident-owned park Florida” on the internet there is an array of attractive and exotic parks.

The effort by FMO Conversion Services to assist the residents in buying their parks is much more pro-active and programmatic than years ago. In particular, today’s economic climate shows that many more park owners are willing to sell to the residents.

Every January, Jennifer packs her bags and begins a four month stint as an “itinerant preacher”. Night after night, park after park she tells the story of co-op ownership. At the end of the “high season” most of the “snow birds” return home and Jennifer’s preaching comes to an end.

The rest of the year she spends finalising deals on the parks where the owner has agreed to sell. As you read this, Jennifer is helping residents buy another home park. FMO works with the residents to create a plan for how they will buy the park. FMO looks for 50 per cent of residents to buy in. From then on, once a year each residents association makes an offer to buy the park.

When the seller accepts, FMO Conversion Services works with the residents to create a financing package that is fair to both parties. The residents have to come up with a membership share anywhere from $5,500 to $100,000 per home. Some parks have incredible locations on the ocean.

A range of lenders are available to help buy the park or finance the member share. So home owners buy the park (the land underneath their homes) together and then pay a monthly fee to their co-op. Owners of mobile homes in Florida are eligible for a $25,000 Homestead Exemption.

One of the parks to take advantage of this co-operative status is Alligator Park, Punta Gorda, Florida where 800 residents enjoy the park’s 324 homes. However, in the “hot humid high season” only about 75 people stay behind. The park has many amenities, a 25 acre lake and fortunately no alligators. The co-op share investment is $27,000.

Also, LaCasa Mobile Home Park, North Port, Florida serves 974 homes surrounding eight lakes. Hundreds of palm trees are spread throughout the park. Over half of the residents live there year round so that makes for lots of activities. There are numerous amenities, pools and recreation spots. Share prices range from $45,000-$70,000 according to the location of the lot.

The FMO of Florida is a statewide group organised to protect the 1.2 million home owners. FMO has over 100,000 members and chapters throughout the state with 1,200 volunteer officers.

Its subsidiary, FMO Conversion Services responds to enquiries from residents wanting to buy their parks and to owners who want to sell the residents. In their perfect world they would convert every park in Florida to being resident-owned and put themselves out of business.