

Questions remain about rental firm

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April 06, 2007

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Cabin owners and renters are trying to figure out how to get money owed to them as the drama surrounding Sleepy Bear Cabin Rentals' closure continues to develop.

Meanwhile the couple who owned the company have their personal home in Jefferson County for sale for \$1.2 million as several other properties in their name are under foreclosure. Advertisement

The company has officially closed its Sevierville doors, leaving those who already had reservations and those who were renting their cabins through the business wondering what to do.

Century 21 Cove Mountain real estate on the Parkway in Pigeon Forge purchased the defunct company's database of information on renters and owners. According to Century 21 principal broker Noreen McConnell, Sleepy Bear officials informed her all the money owed to renters - more than \$100,000 - has been refunded. Century 21 has sent out letters to those with pending reservations informing them of the situation, since Sleepy Bear officials did not take that step, McConnell said.

Still, some with future reservations are concerned they may not have received money back from the deposit they put on their rental. If that turns out to be the case, McConnell recommends they provide proof of the company's closure, such as a news article, to the credit card company and contest the charge. "We're doing everything we can to help these people," McConnell said. "This has not been an easy thing, but we are handling these people with kid gloves."

Attempts to reach Sleepy Bear Cabin Rentals owners Charles and Nicole Tibbs for this story were unsuccessful. A message to their attorney, Ralph Harwell, drew no response. Previous attempts to contact the couple and Harwell to respond to stories have also been unsuccessful.

While those with outstanding reservations may have already been given a refund, a number of owners claim they are still owed thousands of dollars in back rent. Many of them report having been given checks that did not clear the bank.

Sevierville attorney Ross Gray is representing three people who formerly had their cabins on the Sleepy Bear rental program and say they are owed money by the company. Each of the three suits is slated to be heard in General Sessions Court as they are claims for \$25,000 or less, Gray said.

Gray believes he has good evidence against the company, even if he's not sure he can collect from the company, its owners Charles and Nicole Tibbs, Nicole Tibbs' mother Loretta Stevens who had dealings with the company, or former Sleepy Bear bookkeeper Sally Dykes, all of whom are named in Gray's lawsuits.

As of Wednesday each person named in the suit had been served with court papers except Stevens. As soon as she is served, the case will move forward, Gray said.

For those renters who turn to the Internet for help, there may be confusion. While Century 21 Cove Mountain's Pigeon Forge office purchased the Sleepy Bear database and is contacting customers, Century 21 Cove Mountain real estate of Wears Valley has purchased the former Sleepy Bear domain name and is offering its 180 properties through the site. The two companies have entirely separate rental programs, although they share a name, McConnell said.

The Web site does not currently offer information about the Sleepy Bear properties and refers renters and owners to the Tibbses' phone number, which has been disconnected.

As for the Tibbses, it appears their misfortune continues. Following a string of foreclosures on properties they owned, neighbors report the couple have held a number of yard sales at their home on Edgewater Road in Jefferson County's Chestnut Hill community. Further, the house is for sale, listed for \$1.2 million with Thompson, Carr & Associates Real Estate.

Nicole Tibbs was arrested in late January on 30 felony counts of sales tax evasion and one felony count of theft of property over \$60,000. If convicted of all the charges, Tibbs could face up to 66 years in prison and fines up to \$100,000.

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