

City Council's Underhanded Attack on Camp Paradise

Emily Reilly's motion to unleash the police against homeless residents at Camp Paradise was misguided, repressive — and a clear violation of the Brown Act.

by Robert Norse

Camp Paradise, the homeless-run, self-help encampment sheltering 50-70 people, is still standing tall as fall deepens in seaside Santa Cruz. It is still helping heroin addicts quit their addictions, still taking in families forced to live in vehicles by the area's high rents, still sheltering women fleeing abusive situations, and still protecting homeless people victimized by police repression. The camp still lacks any funding whatsoever from the City of Santa Cruz (though donations of tents, food, winter clothing, and funds are still coming in from the community).

Camp Paradise, located on the San Lorenzo River, has received pledges of \$50,000 in matching funds from Paul Lee's United Service Association to create a homeless conservation cadre called the Santa Cruz Service Corps, which will clean up and police city greenbelt areas in return for campground living space.

In a tumultuous Santa Cruz City Council meeting where Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice threatened some speakers and expelled others, Councilmember Emily Reilly unexpectedly encouraged police to enforce the Camping Ban along the San Lorenzo River — which would have the result of evicting Camp Paradise without ceremony.



Pam waits at the "front office" of Camp Paradise in Santa Cruz. Lydia Gans photo

After two rounds of massive community turnout for Camp Paradise at previous City Council meetings [see "Camp Paradise Wins Reprieve Despite City Opposition," *Street Spirit*, October 2001], many Paradise supporters were initially more hopeful than ever. Local activists like Tom Shaver worked around the clock to find a nonprofit cover group and meet neighbor's concerns as they arose (even though most concerns stem largely from homeless camps not a part of Camp Paradise).

Even more difficult was the struggle to seriously address the concerns and demands of the campers themselves for the first time in the history of any local homeless program. Camp dwellers have already established their independence, and are not interested in becoming some social service provider's trophy. Actually, as a functioning community, they have a real veto over which agency is chosen.

hell's other

by Randy Finland

as long as
the hot & dry
lasts
then it's OK
(somewhat)
but when
the cold & wet
starts
it's quickly
a real drag to
be in the streets

The residents of Camp Paradise have successfully kept destructive influences and hard drugs out of the encampment, and have continued to serve as a home to working people forced out by escalating rents and disabled folks not served by the City's inadequate shelter program. Despite this positive work on behalf of the community, 10 camp dwellers are being prosecuted by City Attorney John Barisone for violating the Camping Ban.

In the days before the City Council meeting on October 23, Camp Paradise had expanded its bicycle repair shop, joined a triumphant UN Day where residents showcased their custom-made "River Rats" racer bike, and upgraded relationships with nearby neighbors.

On the other hand, some activists were anxious at disturbing reports about the City Council's intentions. Jessica Lloyd Rogers, a local writer who had done a lengthy spread on Paradise for the weekly *Good Times* headlined "Paradise Lost," reported that Mayor Fitzmaurice would move to close down Camp Paradise at the council meeting on October 23.

At an earlier council meeting on October 9, Councilmember Ed Porter inveighed against "drug infestation" and "gang graffiti" near Paradise, as well as raising wildly exaggerated concerns for his personal safety there. "This cannot continue," warned Porter.

But as the October 23rd council meeting approached, Porter moved beyond his inflammatory rhetoric to introduce two resolutions. While still intent on moving Paradise quickly away from its river site, Porter now expressed an interest in involving city staff for the first time and looking into making city property available for both an intake site and a campground.

Porter's two resolutions had strong positive language: (1) "to investigate the regulatory, infrastructure, operational, and fiscal requirements to establish a temporary headquarters and intake facility for the Santa Cruz Service Corps... and to implement that facility if no insurmountable impediments are discovered." And (2) "to investigate the... requirements to establish temporary campsites at Pogonip near the Golf Club Drive entrance and/or any other site that staff may find preferable, and to report what information has been developed at the November 13th Council meeting."

If passed, the motions would meet pressure from environmentalists to move Paradise off the riverbank (perhaps the reason for Porter's unseemly outbursts on October 9) and redeem his long-delayed pledge to restore homeless civil rights.

Porter's choice of the Golf Club Drive site was one of many recommended by local homeless activists in the officially-ignored Homeless Issues Task Force hearings of 1999-2000. However, in specifically naming the Pogonip, Porter did not take into account the fanatical anti-homeless bias of well-connected "environmentalists." They apparently snowed the City Council with behind-the-scenes outrage.

The idea that any part of the Pogonip — long considered the untouchable "holy grail" — could be used for homeless camping was the rankest heresy, which could not be accepted or even investigated as a possibility. Such a position was ironic to the point of being ludicrous, considering the Pogonip has over 600 illegal campers and could clearly benefit from a monitored, committed, conservation group that used a few of its 600 acres as a living site, cleaned up the rest, and provided a model of environmentally sensitive camping to the illegals.

Commented activist Becky Johnson, who watched the council testimony and debate, "The whole concept is for the camp to move from greenbelt area to greenbelt area, removing litter, poison oak, and non-native vegetation, and to engage in native habitat restoration. The only reason the campers are interested in the Santa Cruz Service Corps is because they would get a legal place to camp. The reason the City should be interested is they don't have the manpower or the money to maintain the greenbelt areas. Camp Paradise in the greenbelt at temporary work/live sites is a marriage that makes sense and kills two birds with one stone. It is a positive for the environment, not a detriment as Fitzmaurice put forth."

Sycamore Grove, a part of the Pogonip, was the site of a permanent homeless encampment in the '30s. The restoration of a campground there for the homeless was a key demand of homeless activist Jane Imler's 33-day hunger fast of 1985 that established the first cold-and-rainy-night shelter in Santa Cruz.

Indeed, Porter's idea is eminently reasonable to investigate, but to do so requires mobilizing political support, for which he has demonstrated neither the stomach nor the expertise. Porter naively blundered onto this sacred ground perhaps because of his unwillingness to maintain contacts with street homeless activists. Since Porter was elected on a promise to end the Sleeping Ban and gained Green Party endorsement in the November 2000 election, he has never returned a call to this writer or to Johnson.

Perhaps Porter misread former Mayor Celia Scott, a strong homeless civil rights supporter, but apparently a stronger supporter of a pristine and gentrified Pogonip — sanitized and uncontaminated by a legal homeless encampment. Former mayors Celia Scott, Katherine Beiers, Bruce Van Allen, and other shadowy environmentalists did not speak up publicly but reportedly put fatal pressure on the proposal behind the scenes. Despite their shadowy opposition, 95 percent of the several dozen public speakers at the council meeting spoke out in support of Camp Paradise and the Porter proposal.

No speaker publicly raised environmental concerns, though San Lorenzo Urban Restoration Project [SLURP] member Patricia Matachek finally visited Paradise the day before with a hostile Mayor Fitzmaurice. Matachek reportedly joined in the mayor's denunciation of the camp as "unsafe" — unsafe for the residents because of a potential flooding danger (as if homelessness weren't a far greater danger to their well-being) and unsafe for the river itself because of the camp debris that would supposedly float downstream and despoil the river.

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Interspersed with these concerns was a standard anti-homeless bias impugning the honesty of the campers, slurring a homeless woman for having had a baby at all, and repeating the discredited mythology that Camp Paradise would be a "magnet" for homeless people across the land.

Neither Matachek nor any other of the powerful, behind-the-scenes environmentalists raised any significant environmental concerns at the public microphone. But they had done their work in the dark. Porter's Pogonip site, and indeed any sites in any greenbelt areas (where most homeless people camp illegally), were dismissed out of hand by Councilmembers Sugar, Krohn, Fitzmaurice, and Reilly.

Councilmember Primack disputed Emily Reilly's concern that a Pogonip campsite was a violation of the Master Plan and required costly EIRs and studies, saying, "the staff gave me a different story." Disagreeing with the removal of the Pogonip as an option, Primack asked, "Are we incapable of doing anything other than figuring out why the answer is no? Unsupervised camping is a danger. How can we not allow 50 people to camp in the Pogonip when hundreds are there already? I don't believe that Paradise has become a magnet."

Primack raised other important questions: Won't the Paradise's river campsite be occupied by unsafe and less savory campers and gangs once the current campers are forced to leave? Don't we need some sort of restoration plan before we force them out? His motion for such a plan died without a second.

Councilmember Scott Kennedy, a traditional Sleeping Ban supporter, proposed a modified campsite proposal that would allow for a temporary camp that moved from place to place, which drew together a near-consensus on the council. He also tried to include more areas, including greenbelt properties, dismissing alleged costs of studies and reviews as inflated. He noted that recently a temporary skate park was set up within a few weeks, even as a protracted legal battle continued about its ultimate location; couldn't the same be done for a pilot homeless campground project?

Ultimately approved by a 6-1 vote with only Mayor Fitzmaurice dissenting, the Kennedy proposal would investigate the requirements "to establish temporary campsites at City-owned property prioritizing San Lorenzo Benchlands, lower DeLaveaga, and Harvey West Park to accommodate a maximum 60 persons for a one to two month term per site."

However, Kennedy dumped the original November 13th return date for an indefinite date "at a future Council meeting," a vague timeline which could let staff delay or bury the matter. Homeless-hostile City Manager Dick Wilson, for instance, has declined to carry out past directions by the City Council to put in bathrooms in well-camped industrial zones, and to survey private property for use as sleeping zones.

But the worst was yet to come. Around 10:30 p.m., Reilly pulled out what one activist described as a prewritten resolution, not circulated to the audience. It had not been put on the agenda nor was the public allowed to comment on it — a clear violation of the state Brown Act requiring open meetings. Reilly moved "to direct staff to enforce infractions of the city's current ordinances along the riverbank as soon as possible according to the City's normal procedures."

Lest there be any confusion, Mayor Fitzmaurice said, "the critical problem at Camp Paradise needs to be abated." The message to the police department, he said, "was it's okay to do abatement."

Councilmember Sugar added a provision to help campers evacuate in case of flooding, the much-trumpeted reason Fitzmaurice cited in saying the camp had to go. Weather reports for November, Sugar acknowledged, were dry and favorable. Then along with Porter, Fitzmaurice, and Reilly, he voted for the illegal "law enforcement" motion.

Two years before, Sugar had fought to suspend the Sleeping Ban over the winter and asked police to use other laws. Now he was voting to enforce the Camping Ban at Camp Paradise. Porter seemed to be selling out the substance of his two resolutions. What would those resolutions mean if Camp Paradise was dispersed before the staff reports came back on the intake center of the SCSC and the proposed alternate campsites?

Urged Primack: "Before we evacuate, we need a management plan in place. It's not just removing Camp Paradise. Rousting works only for a night. With new folks, they'll come in and, what, get cited every four months like before?"

Prescient and acid-tongued Roxanne Acquistapace summed up the scene even before the council debate began: "Camp Paradise has to go because it solves a problem and because it costs nothing. That is something you cannot endure."

To contact Camp Paradise, e-mail campparadise@hotmail.com. To join or contact Friends of Camp Paradise, e-mail Carl Wilson at radio@cruzio.com or call (831) 425-4787. To contact any member of the Santa Cruz City Council, leave a phone message at (831) 420-5020. To contact Robert Norse & HUFF, e-mail rnorse@hotmail.com.

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