

Santa Cruz Shows Solidarity with Camp Paradise

by Becky Johnson

Camp Paradise, the self-help homeless encampment on the San Lorenzo River, is bracing for anything. Thirty-three tickets were issued to camp residents on August 3, just days after Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice had consoled campers that ticketing their camp was "a low priority" for the police department.

"Other homeless camps are blaming Camp Paradise for the ticketing," said Larry Templeton, the co-founder of the encampment. Those who stand up for the homeless are always blamed for any subsequent crackdown.

Nearly 60 tickets were issued in the morning hours to sleepy campers all along the east bank of the San Lorenzo River. Vouchers for a two-night stay in a local motel were given to a few Camp Paradise residents who were ticketed. Karen Brock of the Homeless Services Center confirmed that 30 two-day vouchers for participating local motels were funded by the City of Santa Cruz. "We were told the vouchers would be offered instead of a ticket," she told members of Camp Paradise.

"They only had five vouchers left when they got to Camp Paradise," said Templeton. "They started way up the riverbank and handed out tickets and vouchers before they ever got here." Activists believe the Santa Cruz Police Department was attempting to avoid charges of selective enforcement were they to ticket Camp Paradise alone. Lt. Patty Sapone of the SCPD called the sweep "routine."



Camp Paradise co-founder Larry Templeton carves a sculpted pole to mark his campsite.

Photos by Lydia Gans



Donna prepares a snack for her three sons at Camp Paradise's cooking area. She and her family had trouble getting into shelters because there are "too many of them to accommodate."

COMMUNITY SUPPORT GROWS

Unlike many homeless encampments, Camp Paradise does not suffer from the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) factor. Nearby Felker St. neighbors are among the most enthusiastic supporters of the camp. The Ocean St. Extension neighbors and the Odd Fellows Cemetery, the Camp's closest neighbor, all sing the praises of the group of homeless people who drove the drug dealers and the alcoholics away from the riverbank, and cleaned up years of neglected trash.

A loose organization of supporters formed the Friends of Camp Paradise and set up a table on Pacific Avenue. They collected signatures on a petition to Santa Cruz City Manager Dick Wilson urging him to dismiss the tickets and to allow Camp Paradise to remain in its current location until another site is found. Over 1000 signatures were collected.

"Support for the camp has been overwhelming," commented Rabbi Chayim Levin, also a neighbor of the camp, who tabled for several days for the clean and sober, self-help campground that has cleaned up an estimated 24 tons of trash along the river since January of 2001.

Earth First! and the Green Party have both passed resolutions in support of Camp Paradise. But support is not universal. Anti-homeless bigots on local internet forums discuss "Camp Parasite" and promote removal of the camp by police. A few members of the San Lorenzo River Task Force attempted to pass a resolution calling for the removal of Camp Paradise. But opposition was not universal and discussion of a resolution was sent to committee.

On August 9, Templeton appeared on the "Voices from the Village" television show, along with City Councilmembers Scott Kennedy and Mark Primack, and Camp Paradise neighbor and supporter Carl Wilson. During the taping of the show, Tom Shaver, a member of the Community Housing Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (CHLTSCC), proposed seeking the oversight of the CHLTSCC for Camp Paradise. Kennedy and Primack agreed to meet with Templeton and members of the CHLTSCC to discuss a non-profit agency taking over management of the campground with City permission.

Kennedy suggested to Templeton that the tickets could be dismissed at a rate of "two bags of trash removed per ticket" and that Camp Paradise should submit a request for payment for trash already removed from City land.

Primack, who claims homeless credentials due to his chairmanship on the board of directors of the Homeless Garden Project, has been a supporter of the anti-camping ordinance. While Primack initially held the position that the camp must be taken down, he has been persuaded that a workable solution can be found; he no longer opposes the camp remaining at the current site temporarily. He may favor allowing the camp to remain until the armory opens on November 15, and space in the local ISSP shelter program expands five-fold during the winter.

Primack and Dr. Paul Lee, founder of Citizens Committee for the Homeless, are also discussing ideas for a Homeless Civilian Corps along the lines of what Camp Paradise has already been doing. The plan would be to move onto a piece of property, clean up trash, repair erosion, and restore native vegetation. The City of Santa Cruz could use such teams to maintain greenbelt areas and simultaneously provide temporary shelter for homeless people.

CAMPGROUND TO EXPAND

"We have another area further upriver that is choked with trash," said Templeton after his meeting with Kennedy and Primack. "We're going to clear out that trash and open up some more campsites."

With increased sweeps by SCPD and Parks and Recreation in the greenbelt area of Santa Cruz known as the Pogonip, many homeless campers have come into Camp Paradise seeking a place to stay, increasing the camp census to 60.

With only 39 spaces in the ISSP shelter, Camp Paradise has been accepting the overflow on a regular basis. "It's hard to turn people away," said Templeton. A few graduate students taping a documentary on Camp Paradise showed up to stay a few days because of the publicity about the camp, but most of the residents learned about the camp by word of mouth. Despite the unprecedented media exposure, the camp has not drawn homeless people from all over the country to camp.

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Happily adding to the population of Camp Paradise, Camper Toni Kelly, featured in a June article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, gave birth to son, Lance, in August. She and her husband were married by Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice in April of 2000. If the City closes the camp during Fitzmaurice's tenure, Kelly and her family of four may become refugees due to the actions of their own minister.

Meanwhile, attempts to put in a portapotty have yet to be resolved. Twice, Camp Paradise paid for a commercial portapotty placed on City land near the camp. And twice, the company removed the unit due to threats from the City, most recently on August 22.

**COMMUNITY HOUSING LAND TRUST
TRIES TO SAVE CAMP PARADISE**

On August 20, the Community Housing Land Trust met at Loudon Nelson Center with City Councilmember Mark Primack and Camp Paradise attorney Paul Sanford. The board voted for two resolutions in favor of Camp Paradise; and Michael Schmidt and Tom Shaver of the CHLTSCC delivered the resolutions to the City Council on August 25.

The first resolution by the CHLTSCC ask the City of Santa Cruz to agree not to take any action to remove the Camp Paradise residents or issue additional tickets until the City and CHLTSCC representatives are able to meet to explore options and opportunities. The second resolution asks the City Attorney to review the Camping Ban Ordinance in order to have language ready, if an agreement with the City and CHLTSCC can be brokered, that would allow the temporary placement of Camp Paradise in its current location or an alternative site.

Meanwhile, no protections exist for Camp Paradise as police, under current law, can move in and destroy the camp at any time. "We are working to make that politically very costly for them to do so," said Carl Wilson.

To contact Camp Paradise, e-mail campparadise@hotmail.com. To join Friends of Camp Paradise, e-mail Carl Wilson at rudio@cruzio.com or call (831) 425-4787.

Contact Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice by phone at (831) 420-5020. Contact City Manager Dick Wilson at (831) 420-5014.

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