

# After the Deluge — Camp Paradise Faces Exile

First outlawed, then flooded out and uprooted, a homeless community struggles to survive

by Robert Norse and Becky Johnson

Flooded out, uprooted and hunkered down in motel rooms, but still united as a community, Camp Paradise dwellers were temporarily occupying indoor quarters in mid-December after an unexpected rise in the San Lorenzo River on Saturday night, December 1, flooded the clean-and-sober Santa Cruz survival encampment.

From their temporary motel quarters, camp leaders were struggling to mobilize their supporters, appeal to the community, negotiate with the City Council, and create another encampment with the help of sympathizers in the Green Party, the Quakers, and homeless activists.

On November 26, Commissioner Irwin Joseph battered four disabled residents of Camp Paradise with a blatantly political court decision denying them the "defense of necessity" against charges of violating the camping ban [see *Street Spirit*, December 2001, "No Necessity for Homeless Survival"]. The very next day, armed with Joseph's judicial stamp of approval, the ironically named "Homeless Resources" Officer Eric Seiley resumed his stalking behavior against Camp Paradise residents with threats to return within a week to uproot and destroy the camp.

Seiley frightened the newly arrived, former Homeless Issues Task Force worker Marilyn Weaver and her partner Doug McGraff into fleeing. The couple had moved to Camp Paradise a few days before, after losing their housing. In Santa Cruz, the nationwide recession has not stopped the profiteering rent spiral, and the City Council has been unwilling to discuss or implement any kind of rent control.



Camp Paradise in better days, before the flood. Tony and Victoria prepare their tent for bad weather.

Lydia Gans photo

**"They didn't wait for government help to evacuate and did all that work themselves. They've also been a vital resource for a completely inadequate shelter system, as well as a model and beacon for homeless self-sufficiency projects."** — Carl Wilson, Friends of Camp Paradise

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When Camp Paradise founder Larry Templeton and others brought Officer Seiley's threats to the attention of the City Council on November 27, outgoing Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice and his council made no reprimand of Seiley and initiated no investigation. On November 28 and 29, Seiley intensified his intimidating behavior.

At the November 27th council meeting, Councilmember Ed Porter returned with an enthusiastic plan to let Camp Paradise temporarily occupy and clean up the site of the old train depot near the former Neary Lagoon area (the site of a 1930s hobo camp). Hostile letters from several nearby housed residents sent Porter scrambling to withdraw his proposal. Porter then promised public meetings with residents and campers on the depot site; the meetings never took place.

As far back as October 23, the City Council had been under pressure from upscale "environmentalists" to move Camp Paradise from the San Lorenzo River [see *Street Spirit*, December 2001, "Are the Greenbelts Just for Joggers and Polo Ponies?"]. But the council wanted to avoid the bad press that simply arresting or deporting them would create. In what now appears to be an insincere and cosmetic maneuver, the council then directed its staff to investigate other potential city park sites as alternatives for Camp Paradise and the Santa Cruz Service Corps work-project where homeless people would clean up inaccessible city greenbelt areas in return for lodging space.

But in the next breath, City Council nay-sayers, led by West-side Bakery owner Emily Reilly, moved to effectively destabilize and uproot Camp Paradise in a small-scale terrorism operation run by the local government with a resolution to "enforce the Camping Ban on the river as soon as possible" [see *Street Spirit*, November 2001, "City Council's Underhanded Attack on Camp Paradise"].

Sweetening Reilly's iron-fist directive was a velvet-glove resolution to "help the campers." This hypocritically worded direction to city staff (added by Councilmember Keith Sugar) promised "a contingency plan for assisting people and their possessions out, in the event of an imminent three-year storm and [to] provide a storage facility for those possessions."

Which resolution would homeless-hostile City Manager Dick Wilson work on first? Would he look for alternative campsites and set up an emergency evacuation plan? Or would he "move to enforce the Camping Ban?" The answer was not long in coming. In the month and a half that followed, Wilson produced no alternative site report at all, but stepped up police pressure on Camp Paradise, particularly after the hostile court ruling by Commissioner Joseph. Nor did his office develop any emergency plan for flooding.

As police visits became more frequent and menacing, Camp Paradise residents and supporters met with Assistant City Manager Martin Bernal. Desperate to avoid police harassment, the besieged campers agreed to move — though none of the alternative sites promised by City Council had been laid out — if only they were given enough time. Eagerly, Bernal agreed to work on "motel vouchers."

Then came the unexpected rains. On the wild, wet night of December 1, Templeton put out a call for help, noting the river was rising 18 inches every 45 minutes. "We were watching all the debris coming down the river from up above, and we started pulling stuff to high ground," said camp resident David Pfaff.

Around 9 p.m. on Saturday, December 1, when water lapped up to the edges of the most low-lying tents, the decision was made to evacuate the camp. "The water came clear up into our kitchen area," said Templeton. A network of community supporters, loosely organized as part of Friends of Camp Paradise, put out the call for people to bring trucks and vehicles down through the Odd Fellows Memorial Park Cemetery to pull people, pets, and essential property items out.

"I saw some tents flowing down the river from above," said one camper whose tent ended up under four feet of water.

According to Santa Cruz Parks and Rec, there are an estimated 600 campers upstream from Camp Paradise, all of whom are camping illegally. An organized and tireless effort by camp residents and community helpers went on into the night to pull tents and gear up out of the water and onto higher ground.

"The police met with caretakers from the cemetery and got them to open up the two gates, the one by the fence near the river and the one by the road above," said Dan Hopkins, a longtime homeless activist.

"They opened up the way and then they took off after determining there was no real risk to life or loss of property," said Bear as he carted mud-covered, plastic packing crates up the hill from the river to a staging area on a small road in the cemetery.

"The community turned out in minutes," Bear said with conviction in his voice. "Their support has been awesome."

Indeed, it was the community that turned out to help the camp. Two private property owners have donated two garages for storage, and Dr. Paul Lee helped to fund some motel rooms for some of the displaced campers. The Quakers helped greatly by bringing trucks down, and transporting people to motels.

Templeton called the Red Cross directly and asked for help. "They would not help us. Even if we was wiped out, all they would do is refer us to the Homeless Services Center [HSC]. Continuum of Care member Jim Moran also called FEMA and the Red Cross. No one would help the camp." Ironically, the HSC had announced months earlier that its emergency shelter program was full and unofficially sent "overflow" refugees to Camp Paradise.

About five people stayed at the camp and watched the river rise throughout Saturday night. In the morning, when the coastal flood tide was at its peak, the water came up into the kitchen area, and reached its highest point. Crews took anything in danger of being pulled down the river up the bank to higher ground.

Templeton had to be taken to Dominican Hospital when he injured his

back in the process of removing the camp. During the trial of the Camp Paradise 8, Templeton had testified he is disabled due to having "broken his back in three places in a silo accident."

Mayor Christopher Krohn came down with one of his children and toured the site and also put in an hour of "hauling time." But Krohn declined to call for city trucks and workers to help or to effectuate any "plan" buried in the City Manager's office.

Some, like longtime homeless sympathizer, outdoor camper and environmentalist Scott Graham, suggested Camp Paradise residents should have anticipated the coming deluge and moved after a heavy rainfall on November 27. "They had too much stuff down there," added Graham. "With a generator operating near the river and huge amounts of stuff there, they were actually redeveloping the area — not camping lightly on the earth."

Others, like Friends of Camp Paradise supporter and nearby resident, Carl Wilson, noted that the speed at which the river flooded was highly unusual. "Camp Paradise people themselves admitted the camp had become too large and unwieldy to handle the emergency as quickly as they might have," he said. "But they didn't wait for government help to evacuate and did all that work themselves. They've also been a vital resource for a completely inadequate shelter system, as well as a model and beacon for homeless self-sufficiency projects."

Wilson added, "Our Embarrassment, Tim Fitzmaurice, has criminalized the homeless community at night and won't allow them to shelter themselves or set up any legal campgrounds."

No help came from the City Manager's office, which apparently had neither the will nor the plan to help move and evacuate the sizable camp in the emergency. The promised city trucks, personnel, and storage space were nowhere to be found. Four days after the flooding, city-led workers showed up to clean up some of the remaining debris with Camp Paradise residents joining in to help.

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Krohn, newly rotated into the "weak Mayor" spot (in Santa Cruz it is the City Manager who controls the police department and city workers), did tour what some called "Lake Paradise" after the waters receded. But he issued no directive to get city staff to follow the clearly stated Sugar resolution of October 23, which decreed that the city develop a plan to help homeless campers in the event of just such an emergency.

On the upside, Paul Lee, of the newly-formed Santa Cruz Service Corporation, and city social services paid for motel vouchers for the displaced Paradise residents for a two-week period. Implied promises were bruited about that if Paradise residents kept "a low profile," Mayor Krohn would find alternative sites for the camp or perhaps extend the motel vouchers.

Homeless activists were skeptical. "It's highly unusual for them to issue vouchers," said Becky Johnson. "They don't want this issue to erupt during the Christmas shopping season. But after Christmas sales are over, the gloves will be off."

Meanwhile, vehicular residents from Home on Wheels (HOW) were reeling from a law enforcement crackdown on vehicular homes in Harvey West Industrial Park, using the City Council's anti-homeless restrictions on parking [*Street Spirit*, October 2001, "Santa Cruz Ratchets Up Anti-Homeless Clampdown"].

Krohn, three years before, had voted to declare "sleeping a human right" and seconded a motion to suspend enforcement of the sleeping ban unless there were a specific health or safety concern [*Street Spirit*, January 1999, "Activists Fight

Santa Cruz Sleeping Ban"]. Now, facing another cold winter with more homeless and less shelter, a more conservative Krohn refused to bring the motion to suspend enforcement of anti-homeless laws up for vote, even though he had a probable majority for some kind of relief action.

And this year, in the government-manufactured "terrorist" mania, the Winter Shelter Armory was demanding picture ID for access to its 100 floor spaces, something not readily available to every homeless person. Yet, Homeless Service Center provider Ken Cole could still claim there was "space" at the Armory — but who could use it?

At the City Council meeting on December 11, HUFF (Homeless United for Friendship & Freedom) raised a small protest tent both in support of Camp Paradise and hundreds of other homeless people in Santa Cruz, only 10 percent of whom had legal shelter.

The small HUFF Tent City trial balloon at City Hall was declared a "limited success" by its small band of shivering supporters at midnight as they took it down and went home. But a continued protest village along the lines of Portland's Dignity Village, Seattle's Tent City III, or Toronto's Camp Good Will seemed a possibility as winter deepened.

Rumors abounded at press time of behind-the-scenes meetings between well-intended but power-bedazzled "moderates" and City Councilmembers eager to avoid public embarrassment, but equally unwilling to take any action.

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