

# Camp Paradise vs. City Hall

## Police prepare to evict peaceful, self-help camp as Green Party mayor turns his back

by Becky Johnson & Robert Norse

**T**hey didn't know what else to do. They were homeless on the streets of Santa Cruz, trying to quit drugs, and most had jail records. The local shelter was inadequate or full. Many of them lived in an area long since abandoned by private property owners, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the City of Santa Cruz. Directly across from Salz Leathers, a tannery that was one of Santa Cruz's oldest and most polluting businesses, and behind a cemetery along a garbage-strewn riverbank near the Highway One overpass, this small group of homeless people decided to make themselves a home.

"I've lived along the banks of the San Lorenzo River off and on since 1984. This is my home," says Camp Paradise founder Larry Templeton. Cemetery workers say they haven't seen a Parks and Recreation employee or a Public Works employee cleaning up trash there in 20 years. Area residents rarely took a walk along the shimmering river under the Sycamore trees. It was too dangerous.

Santa Cruz County Coroner's office reports indicate that a disproportionate number of homeless people have lost their lives due to overdose or violence in the area of the San Lorenzo River and the Highway One Bridge. Down-and-out alcoholics inhabited the bushes; and broken bottles, old couches, mattresses, junk food litter, and signs of human defecation were everywhere.



This homeless woman in Santa Cruz is one of hundreds of people unable to find shelter amidst the tourists and affluence of this seaside city. Alene Smith photo

**The least likely people have created the best possible model of community. They have demonstrated ecological stewardship by cleaning up the area, shown themselves to be good neighbors, created a drug- and alcohol-free atmosphere, and provided free bicycles and repair to other homeless people.**

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"We decided to clean up our home," Templeton explains. "We bought our own garbage bags and using all volunteer labor, we began to clean up the riverbank." He takes a drag on a cigarette, his eyes squinting from under the brim of his baseball cap. Blue light shines down on him through the blue tarp canopy stretched above him. All around him, neatly organized, are bicycle parts, tools, and a workbench.

This past winter, the homeless camp dwellers put up the blue canopy and three or four tents were pitched below. They felt safety in numbers, and since they were all trying to quit drinking or doing drugs, they helped to keep each other sober.

"I came here in October of 2000," said Danny "Cookie" Blair, who is unrivaled as the camp cook. "Kay and Donald came about that time, too."

Outside of the blue canopy, they built a river-rock firepit for cooking. As they cleared the trash away from their tents, they planted vegetable gardens.

More people joined them. Each began to improve the camp in the way they were most suited. Joseph built a footbridge over an eroded section of the path. To keep it from washing out again, he built a goldfish pond. The paths from the nearest street were widened and smoothed out so Camp Paradise resident Kay, who uses a wheelchair, could come and go. She holds down the camp regularly, watching over things. Her husband Donald works in the bike shop.



For weeks at a time, nearly 20 bags of garbage showed up next to the garbage receptacle along the river levee bike path. One day last April, a Parks and Recreation worker walked down the river to see where all the bags of garbage were coming from.

"When he got here he was amazed," reports Cookie. "He couldn't believe all the garbage we'd cleaned up."

"The place was starting to look real pretty," Larry says with obvious pleasure. "He told us to keep on doing what we were doing, and that was it."

Larry points to a gate in a six-foot-tall chainlink fence next to the cemetery. "See that gate?" he says. "The garbage here was piled higher than that gate. We pulled a truck up to this gate from the cemetery and loaded up all the trash. It weighed in at 4800 pounds at the landfill, and that was just one of our clean-up efforts."

Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice got word of the camp from City Parks and Recreation workers and came to visit the camp in May. "He looked around and said it was real nice here," said Joda.

One of the campers has AIDS and uses medical marijuana. When the mayor arrived, he saw his five tiny plants in little pots. "Put those out of sight," Fitzmaurice advised. "He said he'd try to get us a dumpster and a port-o-potty," added Kay, "but we never heard from him again."

The next day a police officer came to the camp and pulled up four of the plants. The "nicest" one he kept in its pot and took away with him. The homeless patient argued that as a legitimate medical marijuana user, he was entitled to grow five plants. The police department then told some members of the Santa Cruz City Council that the campers were growing 60 plants by the river.

Although the vast majority of residents on nearby Felker Street supported Camp Paradise, one neighbor complained. The police came down and placed notices on all the tents ordering them to clear out by July 1st or face arrest. With literally no place to go, the campers decided to talk to the press.

Camp critics like City Councilmember Ed Porter later took Camp Paradise to task for not remaining "low-profile," but that decision was really made for them by Mayor Fitzmaurice and the police. The mayor made promises he didn't keep and then allowed the police to take actions that directly violated his commitments.

Larry Templeton reports that the mayor has not returned his phone calls in a month. Toni, a pregnant mom living at the camp, who was married in a high-profile ceremony by Mayor Fitzmaurice last year, says she's still waiting to get word back from the mayor about the photos of the event that he promised them. Instead of waiting for the City Council to make good on Vice-Mayor Christopher Krohn's two-year-old promises to set up portapotties in heavily-used camping zones, Camp Paradise residents paid for one and installed it, as well as trash cans.

Ironically, both Porter and Fitzmaurice were elected to the Santa Cruz City Council with Green Party endorsement (Fitzmaurice actually is a Green Party member himself), which included a commitment to end the City's Sleeping Ban law — those sections of the Camping Ordinance which criminalize sleeping from 11 p.m. to 8:30 a.m. each night. The police are threatening to ticket campers and destroy the campground under another section of the same law that these two promised to amend.

Soon television stations, newspaper writers, and freelance videographers were showing up at the camp and stories appeared in several major newspapers.

Bureaucrats were interviewed and the police department granted interviews with selected press members. The agencies that now said they were going to destroy the campground admitted they had some appreciation for the estimated 24 tons of trash removal and habitat restoration, the drug- and alcohol-free atmosphere the camp dwellers have maintained, the no-cost bicycle repair service they have provided to the local community, and the complete lack of vandalism to the nearby cemetery in the months in which Camp Paradise had come into being.

"We have to prevent chaos," warned Deputy Police Chief Jeff Locke as he explained why they must ticket, dismantle, and disperse the camp.

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## Camp Paradise vs. City Hall

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Six years ago, Councilmember Scott Kennedy and other bureaucrats broke their word to the last low-income campground in Santa Cruz, the Coral Street Open Air Shelter. Around Christmas of 1995, they made several hundred homeless people domestic refugees — more than six of whom ultimately died, denied the protection of a community and nearby emergency services.

Speaking about Camp Paradise, Mayor Fitzmaurice piously intoned: "We must get these people into social services." Meanwhile, the only local emergency shelter (with a capacity of less than 40) began sending their overflow down to Camp Paradise. They sent us two families last night," Templeton said. "One family was a mom, a dad, and three little kids. Now William (age four) will have someone to play with."

Campers no longer cross over the river for meals, preferring Cookie's legendary "camp stew." "We only use the Homeless Services Center [HSC] for showers now," Templeton says.

It's little wonder the campers rarely use the nearby services. The Highway One Bridge connecting the HSC homeless "ghetto" with Camp Paradise has no pedestrian access. "They say you are exposed for 15 seconds," reports Chris, who has been sober exactly one week. It is a \$182 ticket to walk across the bridge.

In the last two weeks, Templeton estimates, the HSC has sent at least 15 people to the camp for accommodations because the City could not provide a legal safe sleeping place for them. And if they found their own place, they would risk ticketing under the Sleeping Ban if they slept, ticketing under the Blanket Ban if they covered up with bedding, and ticketing under the broader Camping Ban if they put up a tent for protection.

What will Camp Paradise do when the police come? One camper said, "There are eight of us who will not go, but stay and be arrested." Others are already making plans to leave. At the same time, campers from further out in the wild, from the Pogonip greenbelt area, are starting to move to Camp Paradise.

But then anyone who has been there can't help but be thankful for being in such a special place, where the least likely people have created the best possible model of community. They have demonstrated ecological stewardship, shown themselves to be good neighbors, have created a drug- and alcohol-free atmosphere, have provided free bicycles and repair to other homeless people, and have "encouraged" the junkies and drunks to take their activities elsewhere.

On June 23, eight days before the City's July 1st deadline for expulsion, Camp Paradise held a barbecue, potluck, and concert throughout the afternoon. Templeton said he counted 300 people, even though a conflicting memorial for longtime homeless activists Paddy Long and Elizabeth Gipps drew many sympathizers to another part of Santa Cruz.

Meanwhile, the campers found a lawyer to help them in their negotiations with the City and a paralegal to prepare an injunction that would stop police from creating 45 refugees (the size of Camp Paradise as of June 25).

The Eichorn decision requires courts to allow homeless people to use the necessity defense when charged with "camping" in a city with inadequate shelter beds for all homeless people. Since the shelter services themselves admitted they were all full, ticketing the campers would be frivolous, since the charges would eventually be thrown out. Since police have had no difficulty in ticketing other homeless people in the area in the same situation, however, an injunction would be necessary to stop this prejudicial practice.

"These people have turned their lives around and learned how to live together, and they are a good example for all of us to learn from," said Attorney Paul Sanford. He is currently in negotiations on behalf of Camp Paradise with the City and the police.

Supporters have formed Friends of Camp Paradise and are organizing resistance to closing the camp. "Our bottom line is they shouldn't close the Camp until they have somewhere for these people to go to," explained Bernard Klitzner, recently exonerated in the Koffee Klatch 3 trial on June 1.



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"This is part of a broader struggle," said activist Jim Cosner. "The entire houseless community here [1000-2000 each night] see Camp Paradise as a beacon and an example. They need to stand fast and those of us in houses need to support them."

Authorities, perhaps eager to divide the homeless community, have stepped up busts against other campsites, but startled by the favorable publicity, have so far left Camp Paradise alone — other than regularly threatening them and setting up new deadlines for eviction. In another arbitrary show of force, Officer Eric Seiley told Templeton recently that any attempt to play amplified music during the barbecue would be stopped, even though the campers agreed to pay for any permits involved.

The camp rabbi, Chayim Levin, pays daily visits to the camp. "When the time comes for the police to clear this camp, I'm setting my tent up here and sleeping with these people," he said. "What could the campers do if and when police throw them out of Paradise? Homeless people in other urban areas have established mobile campsites that move from place to place around the City."

Dignity Village in Portland and SHARE in Seattle are self-managed homeless camps that are clean and sober, like Camp Paradise. They set up camp and stay there until the City demands they move on, then find another spot, all the while gathering supporters, getting their residents regular employment, and making the invisible poor visible so the issue cannot be ducked.

Another proposal is that campers, if faced with the bulldozers, would fold up their camp and establish a small "demonstration" camp at City Hall or downtown where shoppers pass by. If police tear down the camp and arrest the campers there, another tent and another volunteer

would take the arrested person's place.

The point would be to shame the business community and City Council into finally addressing the concerns of the City's own \$10,000 Homeless Issues Task Force, which over a year ago unanimously called for rent control, an end to the entire camping ban in the current shelter and housing emergency, and immediate establishment of safe and legal places to sleep.

Homeless Issues Task Force Chair Linda Lemaster was upbeat about the camp but less than optimistic about the politicians. "Camp Paradise is wonderful," she said. "City Council and its police continue to kick homeless people while they're down and to criminalize elementary homeless survival needs. Perhaps the sight of children living and playing in a tent outside the City Hall offices will wake up those in power. My deeper fear is it will take strong court action or more visible homeless deaths to get them moving."

To contact Camp Paradise, or to join Friends of Camp Paradise, call Larry Templeton's message phone at (831) 458-6020 ext. 105.