

Murphys Crossing

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Latest chapter in tempestuous history of labor camp

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

County and fire district officials want substantial safety improvements made at Murphys Crossing labor camp. The owner is willing to make repairs, but can't afford everything the county is asking for.

And the former owners would rather tear the place down than continue to tangle with the regulatory agencies. The Legal Aid Society doesn't want to see the camp close, because the residents would have trouble finding housing elsewhere.

It all boils down to one big bureaucratic mess, which has been going on for more than 10 years over the 32-unit camp, off Highway 129 just inside the Santa Cruz County line.

The latest chapter came Wednesday when everybody involved met in Santa Cruz, trying to resolve the county's lawsuit seeking improvements at the camp.

Assistant District Attorney Morgan Taylor said the meeting didn't produce significant progress in resolving the suit, filed last month against camp owners Cesar and Rosa Maria Gutierrez and former

owners Mike Lewis, Sam Ramos and Ramos's wife, Joan Genovese. The suit asks for fines of \$2,500 for each day the improvements are not made.

Cesar Gutierrez said afterward it was a step in the right direction and that "we may be able to work together." But Gutierrez also said he's not keen on the idea of working with the county.

Gutierrez admits repairs and improvements are needed at the camp. "But you can't just do it overnight," said Gutierrez, a Watsonville accountant who bought the camp in December.

Government agencies "started bombarding me so badly" with demands as soon as he took over the camp, Gutierrez said. The district attorney, county counsel, environmental health and planning departments are involved, and so is the Salsipuedes Fire District.

Gutierrez said the allegations have made it difficult to get financing for improvements, adding that he's already losing \$5,000 a month on the property.

Gutierrez said he's leveled some of the parking and play areas, plans to put in a soccer field for the kids, and provided paint for residents to paint their units.

He has also wired in smoke alarms to every unit, as required by the Salsipuedes Fire District. Since the alarms were installed two months ago, firefighters responded to 16 alarms at the camp, all from kitchen smoke that didn't start fires.

Gutierrez will soon be getting a bill from the fire district for about \$3,000, Salsipuedes fire inspector Jim Dellamonica said.

Lewis, who holds a second mortgage on the camp, said he doesn't believe improvements can be made "to everybody's satisfaction."

"Our solution is to tear it down," said Lewis, who said he and his partners would rather lose the \$225,000 they have already invested than continue to fight the bureaucracy.

The county and fire district are making demands "with total disregard for what's possible" financially, Lewis said.

The improvements the county is asking for would cost \$200,000 to \$300,000, including a sprinkler system that would cost more than \$100,000, Lewis said. The county's suit also seeks structural improvements and a reduction from 32 to 18 units.

"They want it done in six months," said Lewis, who said five years is a more reasonable time line. Gutierrez doesn't have the money to make all those improvements now, Lewis said.

Lewis said some of the things Dellamonica has been asking for are reasonable, but others are "overkill."

"If the people are in such imminent danger, the only moral thing to do is tear it down," Lewis said. Zoning rules would prohibit a replacement camp being built, Lewis said.

Lewis is the only one talking about tearing the camp down. Taylor and Dellamonica said their goal is to see that the camp is safe, particularly on the fire danger.

Dellamonica said his concern is with the safety, and not what the improvements cost. Two people were killed in a fire at the camp 10 years ago, and there have been other fires since, none involving serious injury.

Dellamonica acknowledged that Lewis and his partners improved the camp during their three years of ownership, but said it's not enough.

"If your engine blows up, you don't fix it by painting the car," Dellamonica said. "They've painted the car."

If the camp were to close, it would leave 150 to 200 people without a place to stay. With low incomes and large families, the people would have problems finding other housing.

"Our standing position is to maintain the units," said Gary McNeil of the Legal Aid Society. If they were to close, he said, Legal Aid would push to get the displaced people money for relocation.



Mike McCollum

Salvador Hernandez and his sons, Salvador, Jr., 7, and Jose Luis, 9, can only wait as officials, camp owners, and other interests debate the status of their home, Murphys Crossing Labor Camp.

Caught in middle, residents watch, wait as debate over camp heats up

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

The area near the intersection of Highway 129 and Murphys Crossing is laid with precisely manicured fields. To the east hills rise from the ground and spill into one another, soft in the afternoon light.

Traveling near the intersection a motorist may need to look twice to see Murphys Crossing labor camp. The camp is a few hundred yards from the intersection and only the roof tops of the five barracks-type buildings are visible from the highway.

Murphys Crossing camp was built in the 1950's during the bracero program, a federally funded guest-worker program that ended in the 1960s. With 32 units, it is home to approximately 200 people. Many live there year-round, but some come to Pajaro Valley for the harvest.

The camp's austere, dust-colored buildings squat on bare ground, a sharp contrast to the fertile fields that surround it.

In December, Cesar Gutierrez became the latest owner of the camp. Like owners before him, Gutierrez came with a list of improvements he planned for the decaying camp — paved parking areas, a soccer field, a front lawn, fresh paint, new plumbing.

Since December, Gutierrez has leveled the ground in front of the camp to ready it for paving, but it

remains as bare and as dusty as the rest of the camp.

Last summer, the Legal Aid Society conducted a survey at the camp. It found that 151 people lived there, 82 were school age. Gutierrez said the number of residents is closer to 200.

The survey also found that the average household income is \$7,187 and the average length of stay at the camp is six years. Rent ranges from \$400 to \$525 a month. Most units are studios, but there are some one and two bedroom apartments.

Gutierrez's rent figures are different than the survey's findings. He said rent is as low as \$300, with the average being \$375. He said only one unit rents for \$525. But several people interviewed at the camp said most people pay \$460 per month and had rent receipts to prove it.

In December, residents started having regular meetings with Santa Cruz County Legal Aid representatives and county health department officials. They discussed way of improving living conditions at the camp. At first, quite a few people attended the meetings. But as time passed, fewer and fewer people attended, until there were no more meetings.

The meetings may have stopped, but not the problems. Residents report problems with plumbing that sometimes takes weeks to fix. During the rainy sea-

son, most of the camp is under water.

During the dry season, gusts of wind pick up dust that covers everything — on clothes flapping on lines, on cars crammed close together along an embankment, on children playing on steel monkey bars next to one of the buildings.

The camp is not necessarily on the verge of collapsing from decay, but at best it is substandard and lifeless. Children have a small playing area between a couple of the buildings. Next to the children's playing area is a tiny basketball court without a hoop.

One afternoon this week at the end of a work day, a small group of men stood around the front of a car, drinking beer and talking. The small son of one of the men climbed behind the wheel of the car. Their conversation was occasionally interrupted when the boy lay both hands on the horn and smiled at the blaring noise.

One of the men who has lived at the camp for nearly a dozen years was asked if he had faith that the new landlord would improve condition. He shrugged, then shook his head.

"I haven't see any improvements. I haven't see anything," he said.

His companion didn't have much hope either.

"Every new owner comes here, waves his hand over the camp and says he'll fix this and that, but nothing changes," he said.