

CRACKDOWN ON ENCAMPMENTS

Results of illegal camp cleanup mixed, police say

Homeless

8.30.12



Santa Cruz police officer Barnaby Clark searches an illegal camper at his campsite along Highway 17 just south of the Fishhook on Wednesday afternoon. The search was part of a program to clear illegal camps throughout the city.

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BY THE NUMBERS

ILLEGAL CAMPING
CRACKDOWN

As of Aug. 20, police reported the following results in the first six weeks of a project to clear out homeless camps in Santa Cruz. Police ask residents to report illegal campsites by calling 420-5842.

- 275 citations, mainly for illegal camping
- 108 arrests, mainly for drug charges
- 159 campsites identified, posted with warnings to vacate in 72 hours
- 54 campsites cleared out

Many sites have been cleared, but long-term questions remain

By STEPHEN BAXTER

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SANTA CRUZ — Hiding away in the bushes near the southbound Highway 17 approach to the Fishhook, 45-year-old Thomas Delfino camped in a tent under a brown tarp on Wednesday.

As cars whooshed by the highway and the sun beat down, Santa Cruz police Sgt. Dan Flippo and three officers confronted Delfino.

A mountain bike lay nearby with its serial numbers and frame painted

black — common features of a stolen bike. Two old laptops and four bike wheels were in the tent, surrounded by dirty sheets, empty soda bottles and a stench from a pile of used toilet paper a few steps down the trail.

Delfino, looking sullen, talked to the officers with familiarity. He said he was no longer using heroin, but he still used meth and marijuana.

He said he wanted to stay clean so that he could see his daughter and his

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CAMPING

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girlfriend's family. "But I got high the other day," Delfino said, squinting into the sun.

With an outstanding warrant for possession of drug paraphernalia, he was searched, handcuffed and taken to County Jail. Police would later call Caltrans to clear out the camping gear and trash — minus the orange-capped syringe that Flippo found near the tent.

In the nearly seven weeks that Santa Cruz police have cleared out illegal campsites such as Delfino's around Santa Cruz, Wednesday's find was common, Flippo said.

Most of the people they have contacted had problems with drug and alcohol addiction, yet most of them left after a 72-hour notice.

Police and some residents said the program has made great strides in cleaning up trash in roadside camps, creek beds and other areas. However, police said it might have shifted some illegal campers to areas in Felton and places outside the city.

Some homeless advocates said it was not an long-term solution.

"I think it's been successful in dealing with the areas that have been heavily impacted" by the homeless, Flippo said. "The emails we've been getting have been overwhelmingly positive in terms of sites being cleared. It's a piece in the puzzle."

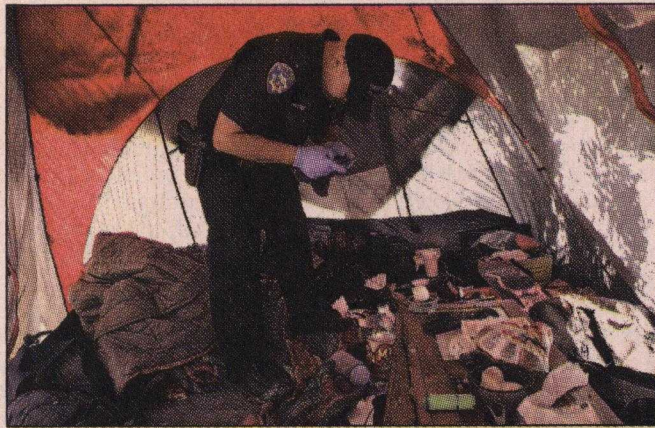
PILOT RESULTS

In early July, Santa Cruz police started the program mainly in response to complaints by residents of trash and safety problems in areas such as the San Lorenzo River levee, Branciforte Creek and Pogonip.

A fire in Pogonip in April also was traced to transients. Environmental concerns grew, police spokesman Zach Friend said at the time.

With help from city Public Works and Caltrans, police launched a program to clear out the camps and arrest those involved in criminal activity.

As of Aug. 20, police cleared out 54 illegal camps and identified 159 camps. Police typi-



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Officer Mike Huynh of the Santa Cruz Police Department searches a tent at an illegal camp Wednesday near Highway 17.

cally ticketed people for illegal camping upon first contact, then posted notices that they had to clear everything out in 72 hours.

Authorities found some of the camps were hangouts for drug users, such as a wooded area near the offramp from Highway 1 to northbound Highway 17, Flippo said.

The train tracks below Bay Street also were a hot spot, where neighbors were annoyed by late-night noise and drug use. At a marsh near Jessie Street and the San Lorenzo River, police said they found a camp with two mattresses that had been used for prostitution.

Camps also were dismantled between Highway 1 and the Santa Cruz Memorial cemetery on Ocean Street Extension.

"That used to be a go-to spot for a long time," said officer Ron Inouye, who has been working on the project. "But now, nothing."

Some police believe the homeless had congregated in wooded areas near Highways 1 and 17 because it's a convenient spot. They can panhandle for money on Mission, River or Ocean streets, get food from churches and other food pantries, then buy drugs from dealers in the wooded areas.

Their walking or biking radius is only a few miles, Flippo said.

Since the program started, police said the camps have shrunk from large, established campsites such as the one near the Fishhook to smaller, more mobile sites.

Volunteers and city workers also cleared brush along with the campsites at the San

Lorenzo River levee, and some say the change in the past month is striking.

However, police said they had heard more reports of homeless in areas in the San Lorenzo Valley. They were starting to work with the Sheriff's Office on it, Flippo said.

When police approach a camp — often identified by residents' complaints — they typically ask occupants if they are familiar with shelters such as the Santa Cruz Homeless Services Center on Coral Street.

Flippo said officers carry cards with information about drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, food pantries and other programs.

"We try to explain the services available to them," Flippo said.

He estimated about one third of the people they've contacted in the project used the services, about a third of the people didn't use them and a third said they didn't want them. Many of the programs don't allow drug use, and they are admitted drug users who don't want to participate, Flippo said.

Others said the shelter is full, which it often is. Or they said they don't want to go there because of "drama," Flippo said — often related to the lines and cluster of people.

FUTURE WORK

Although homeless advocates said they appreciated the environmental improvements in the project, some wondered about some unintended consequences.

Similar cleanups have happened recently elsewhere in the state, said Peter Connery,

vice president of Watsonville-based Applied Survey Research. The firm conducts a homeless census in Santa Cruz County every two years. There were about 2,770 homeless in the county in 2011.

Really, breaking up encampments has gone on "forever in the history of homelessness," he said.

"It's not a strategy. Folks aren't going away, they're just moving them around," Connery said.

When police force them to leave, many people lose their belongings, identification and paperwork that helps them access services, Connery said. Also, if the camps are pushed into the woods in the San Lorenzo Valley, for instance, that could lead to problems there.

"They get put into unfamiliar and more crowded surroundings that could exacerbate mental health problems," Connery said. "It's just tough, and they just don't have a lot of alternatives. There's absolutely insufficient resources in Santa Cruz County to make things better."

Flippo countered that the project essentially was a small solution to a larger, more complex problem.

Standing near Delfino's campsite off Highway 17 on Wednesday, Flippo noted that Delfino had been to several drug-treatment programs.

"How many times do you send people to a treatment program? What's the next step? And how many (theft) victims' (items) were in that tent?" Flippo asked.

"It may not be good for him," he said of the program. "But it's good for the neighborhood."

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