



Chip Scheuer

Guards Jesse Rangel (center) and Mike Conner have a discussion with man hanging out in park.

Something's afoot in Beach Flats

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Eight-year-old Cecilia Ruiz can recite a litany of happenings in her neighborhood that would make a mother's hair stand on end. She has seen heroin addicts shoot up and can recall fights with fists and knives. Drunks are a part of her daily existence.

She lives in the Beach Flats neighborhood of Santa Cruz, an area where some of the most down-and-out people in Santa Cruz congregate.

There are two parks for the children of Beach Flats to play in, but often the parks are overrun with the drunks and drug users.

A move is afoot, however, to change all that — literally afoot.

The city of Santa Cruz, in an effort to return the two parks of Beach Flats to the children and their families, has hired two private security guards to patrol the parks and the neighborhood between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m.

The guards began patrolling Thursday, looking for any violations of alcohol or drug laws, as well as prosti-

tution, abandoned vehicles and littering.

City officials hope for the same success in the Beach Flats area they've had in San Lorenzo Park. Private security guards, less costly than regular police officers, have virtually eliminated the once daily congregation of alcohol and drug users in that park.

Children like Cecilia hope the security guards will make the parks in Beach Flats safer.

"My mom and dad say it's dangerous here, and they don't like us to come here," she said. "I hope they transfer these people away — to jail or someplace."

Patrolling the parks yesterday were security guards Jesse Rangel and Mike Conner. They were accompanied by Santa Cruz police officer Keith Burgoon, who was training them for the Beach Flats work.

Besides looking out for crime, Burgoon was informing the guards of the various Beach Flats "hypes" (heroin addicts), prostitutes, drug dealers and rabble-rousers.

"Do you know Pablo?" he asked them. "That's him

there. He's a real trouble-maker. Keep an eye on him."

In a day and a half on the beat, the private security guards made two arrests and wrote two citations. The arrests were for being drunk in public and for possession of cocaine. The two citations were for littering.

But despite the heavy police presence, several groups of down-and-out types still hovered around the parks, as well as on the streets.

"It's going to take some time, but eventually it will work here," said Rangel, who also patrolled San Lorenzo Park. "There's no respect at all here, so it's kind of hard."

While the officers stood on a street corner with a view of both parks, a group of young men practicing soccer techniques began an earthy discussion in Spanish. One of the men made obscene gestures toward the officers.

"What did they say?" Conner asked Rangel, who speaks Spanish.

Rangel blushed and shook his head. "Nothing," he responded.

That kind of attitude and

the prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse will make it extremely difficult to turn Beach Flats into a halfway respectable neighborhood.

But some people have already noticed a difference.

Lucy Trujillo, director of the neighborhood La Familia Center, said the fact that Cecilia and three other children were actually using the park was a dramatic improvement.

"There would have been people from all over in here drinking or whatever," she said. "Just since yesterday, it has cleared up."

Once the security of the park is ensured, Trujillo would like to see the physical aspects of the parks improved. She would like to see more grass, trees and playground equipment installed for the children.

"We are going to make some suggestions to the city Parks and Recreation Department," Trujillo said. "They said in the past that it was useless to fix this place up. They were probably right then, but we're in a new phase of community development now."

Guards —

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Unfortunately, the city needs the protection elsewhere as well. And there's only so much money to fund protection.

Security guards contracted from Pacific Security and Investigation have been patrolling areas of this city since February and everybody agrees the program has been successful.

PSI guards are on duty at San Lorenzo Park seven days a week, and that park is no longer the haven for drug dealers and drunks it once was. Guards also patrol the mall, and have helped curtail the drug-dealing problem at the Loudon Nelson park and community center, which had become a veritable shopping center for substance abusers.

The security guards have worked mainly as a visible presence in deterring crime. Whereas police patrol cars often just cruise by, the security guards are always within a block or two and lawbreakers become aware of it.

"There's been a reduction in arrest activity in each one of the areas where security has been used," says Deputy Police Chief Mike Dunbaugh.

"We could not afford to place a police officer in the various positions that we've placed security guards because our staffing level would not allow it to happen," Dunbaugh says. "It simply comes down to a question of money."

And that question of money has eliminated the guards who used to patrol Beach Flats.

"Beach Flats and Loudon Nelson weren't scheduled to be yearlong," Dunbaugh says. And so the beach patrols were cut off about a month ago. "Loudon Nelson will be cut back after the center reopens (in January). We'll re-evaluate what happens after that."

"The long-term solution is for local government to support law enforcement," says Chuck Anderson, one of the owners of PSI. "Both the sheriff's and the police department need more fiscal support."

In the meantime, the Beach Flats will have to do without the security patrol. And residents have come to understand the financial facts of their police protection.

"There's so much cocaine and heroin that goes on down here and the police can't do anything right now," Golsh says.

"The police cannot come every minute. They can't stay here," Chang says.

Still, simply understanding the problem isn't fixing it.

"There's three times as many belligerent kooks hanging out down here now," Golsh says.