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A drug marketplace night and day

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SANTA CRUZ — The man stood on the corner of Washington and Maple streets Monday at 2 p.m. He broke into a grin when he saw another man approaching him, and called out, "You bring me what I need?"

The second man nodded, pulled out his wallet and handed the man some money. The man on the corner handed his customer a small package and the customer walked off.

According to Police Chief Jack Bassett, such drug deals there aren't rare.

In fact, the chief said warrants were to be issued this morning for the arrest of five drug dealers who have been operating out of Loudon Nelson Park and the surrounding area. The war-

rants are possibly the most serious step yet in the effort to clean up a section of town that Bassett and most residents say has gone downhill rapidly in the past half year.

"It's going to take time; it's going to take neighborhood involvement and it's going to take an awful lot of police presence to clean things up over there," Bassett said Monday afternoon. Bassett confirms that the area has become a major marketplace for drug dealers selling crack, cocaine and marijuana.

"There have been incidents of boys being told by the dealers that they can't even walk through the park," said resident Carol Fuller. "It's become unusable in the past two months because of the situation."

According to residents, drug transactions have

become commonplace in the neighborhood. As a result, a number of arrests have been made in the area in the past three months for everything from narcotics dealing to disturbing the peace to assault with a deadly weapon.

In August a man was charged with attempted murder after a shooting behind the park. In September two brothers were arrested on the same charge following a stabbing in the park.

"There are seniors in the neighborhood who feel like prisoners in their own houses," said Fuller. "Mothers won't let their children go to the park. We see 12-year-old kids on skateboards buying crack."

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"There was a guy walking around the neighborhood on Sunday wearing a T-shirt that said 'Crack — \$20'," Fuller said.

The current spate of trouble is the direct result of two unconnected occurrences, according to residents. Early this summer, police decided to clean up San Lorenzo Park by posting unarmed security guards there. Many of the drug dealers who had held court there relocated to Loudon Nelson Park. The Community Center there had been closed due to problems with the aging structure that housed it and the constant flow of community members had been cut down to a trickle of local residents who used the park.

That trickle had almost dried up completely by August.

"Since the center has closed it's heated up from what was a low-key bit of drug dealing to a full-scale operation with continual traffic and people making purchases all night long," Fuller said.

Some residents have found dealers performing transactions in their front yards and garages. Some have found holes in their yards where they suspect that dealers have stashed and later recovered their goods.

And it's not all dope dealing. Loud fights are now common in the neighborhood. Residents who live near the

park say they've heard dice games being played in the street at 4:30 in the morning. In the vacant lot next to the 7-11 on Chestnut and Laurel Streets a man curls up to sleep on a large cardboard box every night. Residents say he's been living there for more than a week.

In August, security guards were posted at the park; one from noon to 8 p.m. on weekdays, two from noon to midnight on weekends.

But in many cases, the dealers simply extended their territory to local street corners. A lookout stands on one corner and directs potential customers to dealers on other corners.

So now the security force has extended its patrol area to a stroll through the neighborhood.

Which has convinced many of the dealers to simply wait at the park until the guard is out of sight and then go about their business.

About three weeks ago, a group of about 20 residents got together to discuss the problem. They presented their concerns to city officials, who then agreed to a meeting. Last week about 80 concerned residents gathered to express their concerns to Bassett, Mayor Jane Weed and officials from the District Attorney's office and Santa Cruz High School, which is situated adjacent to the area.

"We had to do something to reclaim the neighborhood," Fuller said. "And everybody was impressed with the police and the City Council's response."

But no one held out any magic answers to the residents.

"When you have a weak area, the police aren't going to make it strong, the people within that area are going to make it strong," Bassett said. "If you let a broken window sit, you're going to get more broken windows."

"We're putting as much over there as possible," Bassett said, but added, "I think the citizens can start accepting the responsibility for the neighborhood and send a message to the drug dealers that they aren't interested in having that go on in their neighborhood."

Fuller agrees. "This isn't entirely a police matter," she said. "It's an opportunity for people to be citizens and take control of their own lives."

And the residents are beginning to take control. Sunday they held a neighborhood picnic at the park and Fuller estimates that about 80 of her neighbors showed up. A cleanup effort is scheduled for Sept. 27, and a community rummage sale — the proceeds would go to help organizing costs and fund better lighting in the area — is set for Oct. 11.