

Sheriff tells town meeting police action not the answer

By JOAN RAYMOND
Sentinel Staff Writer

BEN LOMOND — "Do you want to turn Ben Lomond into a dry county?" Sheriff Al Noren asked 50 residents who turned out on a sticky Wednesday evening for a downhome town meeting sponsored by the Ben Lomond Town Association.

The residents wanted to know what the sheriff could do about open containers of alcohol on the street, littering, foul language, unleashed dogs, minors drinking at Ben Lomond Park and not leaving when the park was closed, as well as "open" drug use.

Businessmen say transients who gather at the park along the San Lorenzo River are a bad influence on the youth and also aren't exactly good public relations for the town's commercial district.

But Noren told the audience: "Maybe the things that bother you are simply not against the law."

The sheriff said there is no law in this county against open containers of alcohol on the street.

Even though a lot of people — for the size of Ben Lomond — showed up for the meeting, Noren said, "I don't know if that would prompt the board (of supervisors) to pass an ordinance to eliminate alcoholic beverages on the street."

As far as littering goes, Noren said "you're whistling dixie. I don't see us being able to wipe out litter through police action."

When it comes to foul language, the sheriff said the days are gone when it is against the law to use foul language in the presence of women and children. He did say the penal code addresses abusive language, but only on the grounds someone has been incited to violence.

"If you wanted to make a citizen's arrest and testify you were incited to violence (by abusive language), then the District Attorney could probably get a conviction," Noren told the crowd.

About dogs running around without leashes, the sheriff said, "I don't propose with the cuts

to my personnel that people start enforcing leash laws."

The sheriff stuck up for his deputies and told the Ben Lomond residents he did not think they were being "shortchanged" by law enforcement.

"I'm telling you that they (deputies) can't spend all their time here and tell Felton, Boulder Creek and Brookdale residents to go fly a kite," said the sheriff.

Referring to the park transients, the sheriff said, "I could see that the average person would be reluctant to go in the park, but the fact is, I can't control their appearance. It is very difficult to enforce laws against people you don't like..."

"Most who frequent the park are spawned here in Ben Lomond...The greatest thing you can do is to have this meeting and draw attention to the problem...many things viewed as breaking the law just aren't breaking the law."

"...But are bothersome," added a meeting-goer.

One of the residents wondered if the citizens could form a "civilian patrol," but Noren said they would have to first go through the police academy and achieve 200 hours worth of training.

"What you need to do," said the sheriff, "is try to communicate with groups who are putting up the scary front that precludes you from going to the park. These people who put the fear of God in people have the same rights as you do."

Residents criticized deputies for not making arrests during fights, for not patrolling often enough at the park and for allegedly ignoring the breaking of the law.

Noren said the citation and arrest statistics show the officers are doing their job, but he said he would tell the deputies to patrol the park more often.

"Maybe some of the things that bother you are simply not against the law. Most kids are good. You've only got a few ying-yangs who are the problem," Noren said. "We can crack down, but it doesn't solve anything."

One resident who lives across from the park, Sue McCrea, complained about people loitering on the library steps. The loiterers scare off people who want to use the library, said McCrea.

"What law are they breaking?" asked Noren.

"Well...nothing," the woman admitted. "We cannot do things just because they upset you," said Noren. "There has to be some law for it."

Noren said his officers on the day shift spend an average of an hour per day in Ben Lomond.

"They must be asleep somewhere," responded one resident.

Noren did agree to ask deputies to write their reports at the park, so they could keep an eye on the park activity at the same time.

Noren was not the only public official on hand for the meeting. Also speaking were county Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, Acting Parks

Director Benton Angove and California Highway Patrol Lt. Gerry Mills.

Residents asked if there would be a fence erected around the park.

Angove said the fence was taken down three years ago as a result of requests from a town meeting at that time.

"That is a dramatic step," said Angove. "If we want to invite people to the park, then fence it, it gives a mixed message."

Cucchiara reported the problem of fixing potholes is "at least beginning to be addressed, but we are nowhere near the solution."

Cucchiara said Department of Transportation officials would be visiting Glen Arbor Road this week and then give the county a schedule of when repairs would begin on the damaged road.

Cucchiara noted the local share for the cost of fixing roads has doubled now that the county receives less assistance from the federal government.

Cucchiara's monologue on the county's budget woes were interrupted by one resident who said, "I would like to hear from some other speakers."

The supervisor also said he hopes street-cleaning and litter control will be reinstated. Money for those jobs was taken away for road repairs.

He has already asked the public works department to paint crosswalks and stop-lines downtown as soon as possible.

He also said he would pursue having raised dots installed in the road to slow drivers down. Speed bumps are illegal, the supervisor noted.

He said the Town Association could request a stoplight be installed by the Department of Transportation, but the supervisor warned that such a stoplight might create new hazardous conditions elsewhere.

The supervisor said the town could apply for help from the Youth Employment Service program for community clean-up projects and from the California Conservation Corps for labor-intensive projects. There is also help available on a restrictive basis from the California Youth Authority, said the supervisor.

"The only solution is to devise a community solution," said Cucchiara.

He concluded there must be a willingness to work together "rather than point fingers and to say to someone, 'You're a bad guy, get off this property'."

The supervisor promised to push for a "village design" plan for each of the towns of Ben Lomond, Felton, Boulder Creek and Brookdale. He said to do this all he needs to secure is \$20,000 and two more votes on the Board of Supervisors.

Residents wondered why \$20,000 was necessary just to draw up some plans to beautify the town.

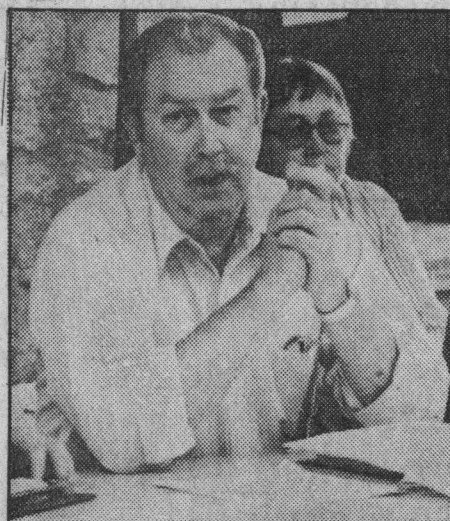
Why can't you buy us five gallons of paint, and we'll do it?" someone asked Cucchiara. Cucchiara responded: "Why isn't the community doing it? The best answer would be to turn around your chairs and talk to each other."

Highway Patrol Lt. Mills said he would alert officers to the problem of drivers running a main stop sign and speeding through town.



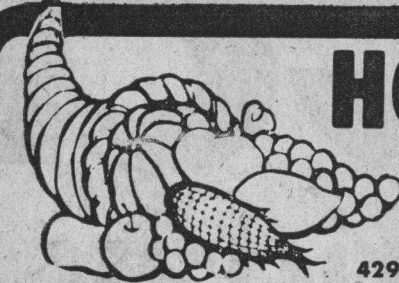
The audience was attentive during Wednesday evening's town meeting.

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Sheriff Noren addresses the crowd.



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