

Placerville's homeless camp to stay – for now

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

PLACERVILLE – Gene Lambert, a Navy veteran and former roofer who was disabled in a fall that crushed his skull and fractured his hip, is known among the homeless population in this old Gold Rush town as “the undertaker.”

At 56, Lambert is the tall doorman who helps maintain the peace at a city-authorized homeless encampment called Hangtown Haven. With his blue trench coat, turkey-feathered hat and a gentle nature that belies the tattooed flames flickering from his eyes, Lambert is also a guardian of Placerville's great experiment.

Last summer, faced with local homeless people taking over city parks and lighting potentially dangerous fires in more than a dozen colonies in the woods, the Placerville City Council accepted an offer from community volunteers and a local property owner. It agreed – for 90 days – to let them erect and operate a fenced homeless encampment on a forested slope a few miles east of the city's historic downtown.

Last week, the City Council voted to let Hangtown Haven live on, with reviews every 90 days, which could allow the homeless camp to stay open until Nov. 15, 2013.

As Sacramento and its homeless advocates grapple with proposals for a tent city or cabins for the hundreds of people who camp in the brush along the American River, Placerville has enacted at least a temporary, functional solution to the intractable homeless issues faced by numerous cities and counties.

In this town of 10,400 residents, born as a rough-hewn mining

camp in 1849 and known in recent years for its rock-ribbed conservatism, sanctioning a homeless haven stirred considerable doubt.

The City Council yielded to homeless advocates by granting a permit to allow the encampment in the 1600 block of Broadway Street, a modest walk from a community center where homeless people receive counseling, job referrals and help with medical appointments. But it set a deadline: The experimental colony was to close Oct. 26.

Instead, the city granted an extended reprieve based on glowing reports. The camp – with 38 tents, 40 residents and land capacity for 60 people – had succeeded in getting homeless people out of the forest and parks without producing a din of crime or vagrancy.

“There has been a concerted effort to make this work,” said Placerville Vice Mayor Wendy Mattson as the council voted 4-0 last week to let Hangtown Haven live on. “This could have exploded in our face. But it didn’t.”

The council made clear, however, that a permanent site for the homeless colony needs to be found away from its current location near a busy transit route alongside Highway 50. It voted to reach out to El Dorado County supervisors on a regional plan to address homelessness in the county seat.

Lambert likes to think Hangtown Haven earned a stay because homeless people and supporters proved capable of maintaining a clean and orderly camp, with people in tents getting along and helping each other in the heat, cold and rain.

The Navy vet, homeless for several years, is one of six members of the Hangtown Haven camp council who seek to maintain harmony by addressing camp grievances and writing tickets for troublemakers. Get caught boozing outside your tent, that’s a ticket. Fail to clean up your mess, that’s another. Punch someone, and you’ll get written up.

Three times, camp leaders have held community votes on the fates of accused multiple offenders. In each case, Lambert said, the colony voted out bad actors "for being obnoxious," giving them 24 hours to pack up and head out.

Placerville Police Chief George Nielsen said the camp has resulted in no overall increase in crime, though he said officers respond to about six calls there a month for public intoxication, "a couple of fights," and to help people in medical need.

He said the colony has eased authorities' fears of fire danger and other disruptions at camps scattered in and around Placerville. In 2010, a fight at a vagrants settlement behind a shopping center on Missouri Flat Road, just outside the city limits, ended with a 69-year-old man shot dead.

Jannette Taylor, 37, has found a sense of security at Hangtown Haven. Taylor used to run a housecleaning business. The business failed. She couldn't pay her rent and was evicted from her apartment, she said.

Now Taylor shuttles between the camp and computers at the Community Resource Center, where showers are provided and volunteers help with résumés and job searches. Taylor said she hopes to find an assembly or cleaning job so she can reunite with two children staying with friends and family. Kids are not allowed in the homeless camp.

"This has helped a lot," Taylor said, seated in her tent at Hangtown Haven. "It has given me an up – a way out."

Property owner Barry Wilkinson agreed to provide 1.5 acres for the homeless colony in July, furnishing filtered well water and electricity under a lease with a local nonprofit, Hangtown Haven Inc.

Community Resource Center staff members interview would-be residents under criteria that ban registered sex offenders or

people considered dangerous. Marie Cook, the resource center's operations manager, said campers must be from Placerville. She checks recent addresses or interviews local homeless people to ensure they're not outsiders.

Volunteers from local churches bring lunches to the camp. A nearby charity kitchen offers dinner. And campers, with donated food or shared provisions bought with food stamps, cook meals that have included hot dogs and grilled shark.

Two residents have moved on to enroll in trucking school. Some have gone into drug treatment. Meanwhile, Lambert is organizing camp Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

There are also movie nights on a 27-inch television. By camp vote, action films are a yes, romantic comedies a decided no.

Hometown Haven council member Kenneth Green, an unemployed house painter, says the camp is compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act. Green helped carve ramps for the motorized wheelchair used by Michael Guthrie, 54, who has cerebral palsy. He moved to the colony after a caregiver passed away.

"Ken said, 'We've got a nice warm tent here,'" Guthrie said. "They've helped me out tremendously. I'm a very spiritual person, and I know I've been blessed."

But Police Chief Nielsen made clear to the City Council – and the panel agreed – that Hometown Haven eventually has to move.

Nielsen said the camp, as well as the Community Resource Center and a cluster of homeless services, is incompatible with fast-moving cars on a hilly stretch of Broadway – "a major artery in our community" – with no sidewalks.

Still, more than 30 people from the camp came to the City Council meeting last week to hail its reprieve.

They stood and waved as Art Edwards, a retired aerospace worker who formed Hangtown Haven Inc. to support the colony, announced: "The homeless men and women of Hangtown Haven have asked me to thank you."

"It's our haven," echoed Lambert, "our home."