

Homeless damaging sensitive S. Tahoe landscape



Known as The Mayor in the homeless encampment, he wishes South Lake Tahoe had a shelter. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

A homeless encampment of about 20 individuals in the middle of South Lake Tahoe has been given a seven-day notice to move on or else they'll be forcibly removed.

Tucked into the meadow off the bike path behind Motel 6 is a community hidden from most people. Tents and makeshift shelters protect them from the elements. Cooking devices vary from crude stoves to old barbecues. Some have coolers. Bikes are common.

Wood has been cut from the area for fencing and other uses.



Mr. Cotter is responsible for building the bridges.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Two sturdy bridges – built well, maybe even to code – cross what would have been wet areas not that long ago.

Well-worn paths lead from one “home” to the next. It used to be the paths were narrower, with better tree canopy.

“Most people out here are local people. They have found a safe, positive environment. A good place to sleep,” says The Mayor. This man has been out here on and off for three years, having lived here through the last winter.



Officer Johnny Spaeth is trying to build a rapport with the people living in the woods. Photo/Kathryn Reed

He laments about the lack of affordable and low-income housing. He said so many come into the meadow with only their paperwork from jail. Their options are limited.

Some who call this area home have jobs. What they don't have is a traditional home.

"The city really needs a shelter," The Mayor told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The city's shelter is the county jail in a lot of ways."

His home is one of the larger areas, with some nicer elements like a hammock.

If this weren't on private land (it's owned by Knox Johnson), and harming the environment (trash, human feces, needles, illegal wood harvesting, illegal trail building, trampling an incredibly sensitive landscape) it would be an ideal location

to pitch a tent. It's walking distance to the lake, the bike path, public transit, a grocery store and many other amenities.



Propane canisters the homeless had been using.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

"We're always going to have a homeless issue. The idea is to make it the least impactful on the environment and community," Officer Johnny Spaeth told *Lake Tahoe News*. He is South Lake Tahoe Police Department's homeless expert. "A red line for us is open flame," Spaeth says as he looks at where briquettes had been started on the ground and have left a visible imprint.

While South Lake Tahoe has had a homeless population for years, last year was the first time an actual encampment started to form. This year it's a true community.



The entrance to this site is on the other side, with rooms sectioned off. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Spaeth knows most of the individuals by name. He knows which “home” belongs to each person. Still, what they are doing – camping outside a designated campground – is illegal.

He understands they are “just trying to get by in life,” but at the same time with so many people in the meadow it is degrading the natural environment, and presents health and safety concerns.

Spaeth has been working with the people to get them to clean up the mess. The department provided them a dumpster to get rid of things. It’s behind the old Carrows and is nearly full of what looks like trash. Next to it are seven propane canisters these people had been using that they hauled out.



Officer Johnny Spaeth listens to Matt tell him how he's gotten rid of most of his junk. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Matt thanks Spaeth for working him, giving him time to sort through his stuff.

"It's just down to the basics for me," Matt tells the officer. He says someone, though, has been mining the dumpster and taking goods.

A decades-old backpack hangs from a tree. A tarp covers things. A bike and books are in the open.

These people have been creative with the resources they have. They've repurposed items to make it work for them.

On June 7 people in the encampment received official notification from law enforcement that they have seven days to move out, though Spaeth had been telling them this day was coming, which is why the dumpster was brought in. Anything left behind will be considered abandoned property and will be considered trash.

Where they will go is anyone's guess.

The Mayor called it a game of hide and seek. But the cops always seem to find them.



This tent is for storage because the homeless have issues with food and wildlife. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Dispersed camping is what the homeless have traditionally done here – meaning there's a tent here and there, not a community. This is less impactful to the environment because people pick up and move on. There isn't the wear and tear on the land.

Spaeth said when appropriate officers will help people get connected to social services, but he acknowledges "resources in the basin are limited."

Most of the people in this encampment are men between the ages of 20 and 40, though for the last month or so three women have consistently been here.

Arresting them isn't what officers want to do. After all, being homeless isn't a crime. Where they pitch a tent, that's what crosses the line – and potentially some behavioral issues could get them in trouble with the cops. There have been fights and issues with aggressive dogs, things that can happen in any neighborhood.

“More people come out here every day. They have nowhere else to go,” The Mayor said. In less than a week, though, this meadow will be off-limits.