

# Neighbours' cry: End 'shantytown' in Saanich's Cuthbert Holmes Park

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A homemade shelter at the entrance to Cuthbert Holmes Park last year.

Photograph By DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

Residents who live near Cuthbert Holmes Park are begging Saanich council to do more to address the "shantytown" in the park by banning camping in environmentally sensitive areas.

Saanich council on Monday night agreed to amend the parks management bylaw to allow Saanich staff to seize, remove and dispose of property discarded in parks.

However, community groups and nearby residents say those amendments, which require final approval at the end of the month, won't address the late-night parties and open fires they say have made the park unsafe.

Cuthbert Holmes Park is a "gem" that's "in danger of being diminished and degraded in many ways," Gabe Epstein, president of the Gorge Tillicum Community Association, told Saanich council.

Julian Anderson, lead steward of Friends of Cuthbert Holmes Park, asked council to follow the City of Victoria's lead and ban overnight shelters in playgrounds, sports fields, footpaths, roads within parks, and environmentally sensitive areas.

Home to the salmon-spawning Colquitz River, all of Cuthbert Holmes is environmentally sensitive, Anderson said.

"A natural-areas park is not an appropriate place for camping," he told council.

"I urge you to please take it to the next step and ban camping in the park."

Vera Wynn-Williams, the association's vice-president, told the Times Colonist that some school groups that used to walk through the park to learn about salmon spawning have stopped because of safety concerns.

Residents are also worried about the fire hazard posed by campfires and tanks of gasoline, Wynn-Williams said. She estimates there are about 10 encampments in the park.

One camper who spoke with the Times Colonist on Tuesday, a 34-year-old woman who identified herself as Anna M., said there are only four camps in the park.

Anna, who used to live in the tent city on the lawn of the Victoria courthouse, has been camping in the park since December and said it's the most difficult camping conditions she has ever experienced.

She said Saanich police come by regularly and she tells them that she and her partner, Kevin, have nowhere else to go.

"I don't want to be here in the mud, I don't want to bother people. It's not a good feeling," she said as someone in another camp played a saxophone.

"If we were being unlawful, they would have been able to remove us right away."

The District of Saanich has a bylaw that prohibits overnight camping, but chief administrative officer Paul Thorkelsson said it's not being enforced.

That's due in part to the 2008 B.C. Supreme Court ruling that found it was unconstitutional for the City of Victoria to restrict overnight camping in its parks if all shelter beds in the city were full.

Thorkelsson said more public consultation is needed before council passes any restrictions on camping in parks.

Saanich Police Chief Bob Downie told council that his officers visit the park regularly and try to take a compassionate approach, offering to help connect campers with housing resources.

Wynn-Williams said some of the encampments appear more permanent and are equipped with generators and walkways made out of pallets.

"We refuse to believe that it's compassionate to allow people to live in Third World, shantytown conditions just because you don't have to look at them," she said.

"We do not feel it's compassionate to turn a blind eye."