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A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

December 17, 2015

Protecting Public Health, Property and People

By David Buckingham, City Manager



What do 30 needles, 200-plus cubic yards of garbage, a 40-foot shipping container and 60 people have in common? Those are some of the stats from the City's cleanup of Morro Creek and the adjacent dunes.

Following a long outreach process that included significant social services support, the City conducted a thoughtful and extensive cleanup of the creek in areas some homeless folks frequently camp.

The primary purpose of the activity was protection of public health and the environment. Much of the garbage in the creek presented a growing public health danger. With El Nino rains expected to cause high flows in Morro Creek this winter, we wanted to ensure none of that refuse washed across Morro Beach and into the ocean. While our focus was on removing trash, we also wanted to protect the personal property of folks who have camped in the creek and dunes and take care to help connect them with crucial services.

Here's an update on what we did:

First, the City put together a comprehensive plan for the cleanup. The plan included all City departments and partnerships with other organizations including the California Conservation Corps (CCC) and Dynegy. Since much of the illegal camping, and thus much of the trash, was on private property owned by Dynegy, its permission and support was crucial. Dynegy contributed \$10,000 – a substantial percentage of the total cost – toward the cleanup.

For 30 days our Police Department conducted a methodical noticing of the planned cleanup areas. That included visiting the entire cleanup zone on a regular basis – and every day for the last 10 days – to ensure the homeless camping there were aware of the planned cleanup. Notices were left at every campsite and every trash pile. Social service workers accompanied our police officers during that noticing to help connect the homeless with help. For example, a homeless veteran was connected with the special social services available for former members of the military.

The cleanup occurred last Thursday and Friday and involved 60 City employees and members of the California Conservation Corps. The first group through the dunes and up the creek were Police Chief

Amy Christey and City Manager David Buckingham. Following our City directive, we methodically and meticulously identified and tagged every item, such as tents and sleeping bags, backpacks and handbags, and books, eyeglasses and photographs that may be personal property of apparent value. That identification process was documented on video tape to ensure accountability.

Next came the property collection crew, who collected, bagged, and tagged the previously identified property – documenting the precise location it came from, and when available by name of likely owner. Our police volunteers transported that property to the City Public Works yard where the Police Department property team logged it into storage in a special shipping container obtained for that purpose. The property will be retained at no cost for a minimum of 90 days. Anyone looking for personal property they have left in the creek or dunes may visit the police station during regular business hours to make arrangements to identify and recover their property. The Police Department, supported by employees from the Maintenance Division and the Harbor Department, did a great job handling that personal property with appropriate accountability and care.

Finally, the trash removal crew came. Confident all personal property had been safely secured, the remaining trash was removed. Guided by City maintenance employees, the California Conservation Corps provided the primary labor for that unwelcome job. Using trash bags and trash pickers for small items from empty food containers to needles, and also handling large items, such as soiled mattresses and broken furniture, trash was removed to the six large dumpsters brought in for the job. More than 200 cubic yards of trash was removed from the creek and dunes.

When you have the opportunity, consider saying thanks to a City employee - especially Police Officers, our Maintenance Division workers and Harbor employees - for their work. This cleanup clearly fell in the “other duties as assigned” section of our employees’ job descriptions - and they did a complex and dirty job with the utmost compassion and professionalism.

The purpose of this activity was primarily to protect public health and the environment - and that was accomplished. The City will continue to work with appropriate regional agencies, and volunteer groups, to address all aspects of the complex challenge of homelessness with compassion for people and protection of our residents and environment. As always, I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this issue. Send me an email at dbuckingham@morrobayca.gov.

Note: This editorial first appeared in Bay News on December 17, 2015.