



Edward Thompson, 24, who has been homeless in Salem for about five years, on a sidewalk downtown last week. ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Homeless displaced by camp cleanups

Police sweeping Wallace Marine Park

Connor Radnovich and Jonathan Bach

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Dean Ford kicks up dirt with each footstep as he struggles to find his bearings on freshly bulldozed land.

It's been two years, and his former home doesn't look anything like he remembered.

Tucked behind Salem's Wallace Marine Park on private land, whereunderbrush once was thick enough to hide dozens of homeless encampments, a practical moonscape is now dotted with gigantic piles of debris and sparse trees.

Ford's head circles around and he points toward trees he almost remembers, trying to find his old campground. All told, he spent the better part of a decade living in the park, but now he has an apartment he received with help from the city.

"All that's left of the Wallace homeless camp near the quarry," he narrates while taking video with his cell phone.

Recent evictions cap 15 months that saw the homeless protest an attempt to clear the land, a property owner threaten criminal trespassing charges and severe rains that flooded encampments.

With the quarry camps dispersed, city leaders are making another pass at a ban against camping on sidewalks during the day should the homeless trade the woods for downtown. Police also have kept a watchful eye on Wallace Marine Park to make sure the homeless don't put down roots there.

For the property owners, the combination of noise complaints — from

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barking dogs, to fighting, to gunshots — vandalism, trespassing, trash, feces and confrontations between campers and tenants or construction workers became overwhelming.

"I know that we have a problem here in Salem with homelessness, and I'm not heartless toward that, but this is just not the right place for them," said Rich Fry, one of the three private property owners with land north of Wallace Marine Park.

Salem Police Lt. Treven Upkes said recent camp cleanups were meant to protect Wallace Marine Park from the destruction that would occur if the homeless were allowed to settle there.

On the quarry land, it takes a few minutes of searching, but Ford and homeless advocate Art Scaglione end up at the base of one of the thickest trees in the grove. There are several wooden boards nailed to the trunk 12 feet above the ground and a small piece of rope dangling from the highest one which used to support a tarp roof.

It's all that is left of Ford's former camp.

Scaglione gestures to a nearby patch of dirt.

"We had two Thanksgivings right there," he says.

The two reminisce a bit longer before continuing east toward the Willamette River where many have made new camps.

It's city-owned land, but even if the city doesn't remove them, the riverbank is only a temporary solution; the area is known to flood in the winter. But for the campers, some of whom have been outdoors for more than a decade, there aren't many other options.

"Everyone is moving down there because there's nowhere else to go," Scaglione says. "This was kind of the last frontier."

That was four weeks ago.

'Forced migration' troubles advocates

Since then, the riverbank camps on city land have been cleared, and the homeless have scattered.

Some have resorted to "hopscotching" — packing light and moving from place to place knowing they will be told to leave, but buying themselves at least a couple days in each location. Frequent homeless sweeps have occurred in Minto-Brown Island Park, and downtown Salem in recent weeks.



An eviction notice is pinned to a tree in front of a homeless camp on private land north of Wallace Marine Park in Salem, Oregon on Friday. CONNOR RADNOVICH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

"They're sweeping everywhere. There's no place for anyone to go. Everyone's kind of panicking," Scaglione said. "Usually, they can jump from one place to another, but now they're sweeping everywhere at once."

Some who left the private land joined a growing camp of several dozen in south Wallace Marine Park, several hundred yards from the new boat dock on what is assumed to be land owned by the Oregon Department of Transportation.

As of Friday, up to 50 campers were packed onto the last patch of private land north of Wallace Marine Park — about 1.2 acres owned by Rich and Stephanie Fry, who have given campers until September 15 to leave before starting a court-order eviction process.

When they are forced out in the coming days or weeks and fences are erected shortly thereafter, it could mark the end of decades of semi-permanent homeless camps in and around Wallace Marine Park. Less than a year and a half ago, more than 150 people lived here.

As the two other property owners — Walling Properties and Somerset Heights — enforced evictions over the summer, police and city staffers coordinated sweeps in Wallace Marine Park to keep campers from planting roots there. One such effort was from Aug. 26 to 29, Upkes said.

"The property owners to the north have removed campers from their land and pushed them all into the park,"

Parks project coordinator Matt Johnston wrote in an Aug. 21 email to Salem Police Department Deputy Chief Skip Miller. "We would like to keep them moving before they get too established in our park."

With parkland previously available to the homeless now uninhabitable, former sites already bulldozed and proactive disincentivizing by the City of Salem, advocates say the city's homeless are running out of places to go.

"While on the surface there are enormous resources going into the homeless problem, what we have seen collectively the last year has made life much more difficult on people living in unsheltered conditions," said Jimmy Jones, executive director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency.

Jones said there are few places for them to rest and the resources put toward shelters are inadequate.

There are about 300 emergency shelter beds in Marion and Polk counties to support more than 1,450 homeless individuals, according to most recently available estimates. A majority of those beds come with requirements of sobriety — a condition many cannot or will not meet.

In addition, now that many homeless people who were in established locations are displaced, other available resources aren't reaching those who need them.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to track and serve the population because of constant forced migration in and near the city," Jones said.

Scaglione agreed. He and his wife, Reggiena, have carted supplies and food to the homeless around Wallace Marine Park every Sunday for nearly five years. He got started after another long-term homeless camp was cleared and the people he was helping moved near the park.

And he's going to do it again if need be.

"We'll follow the largest group because that enables us to help the most people," Scaglione said.

"They always regroup somewhere. The question this time is where."

Sit/lie ordinance

As the campers spread across the city, Salem city councilors are again weighing an ordinance that would ban homeless people from sitting or lying on public sidewalks from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

A previous attempt at such a proposal failed 7-1 in 2017.

This time around, city officials have organized public forums to explain the ordinance and get feedback before councilors take a vote.

No date is set for a possible vote on the latest proposal. However, at least one councilor, Chris Hoy, has warmed to the idea over the past two years.

City department heads stressed the

restrictions would not bar anyone from sleeping on sidewalks overnight. Police Chief Jerry Moore defended the 2017 sit-lie proposal before councilors by saying he was responsible for not just the homeless, but also neighbors, business owners and downtown shoppers.

"We are fooling ourselves if we don't think people are afraid to go to some of these places, whether it's right or whether it's wrong, because of some of the things they see," Moore said at the time.

How did we get here?

The recent evictions were a long time coming.

Starting in summer 2018, tensions began rising as the city successfully housed many from the park, including camp leaders, which destabilized community dynamics.

Their culture of following the rules, keeping a low profile and showing respect deteriorated following an influx of people who were uninterested in following or enforcing those rules.

Arguments grew louder and more frequent, incidents of vandalism and theft at nearby businesses rose, garbage piled up and spilled out of the woods. They were no longer invisible.

In April, Wallace campers had to contend with some of the worst flooding seen in that area. The water was estimated to be 15 feet deep in some places.

Scaglione said many campers — who already didn't have much to lose — lost everything in the flood. The waters also brought out into the open mountains of trash that had been tucked away or buried, caking the ground with all manner of refuse.

Campers were never able to clean up the mess entirely. Incidents of theft between homeless people went up.

Fry, the property owner, said over the past six months, disturbances have gotten worse.

He's received complaints from tenants about people sifting through and scattering trash at his apartment complex, breaking slats off his fence for firewood and making tenants uncomfortable.

KC Klosterman, spokesman for a sand and gravel operation on the Walling Properties land, said fires have been sparked on the property and trees felled for use as firewood and building components.

He said they've had to clean up more than \$200,000 in environmental damages. Toward the end of August, the equivalent of 20 dumpsters of human waste and hazardous materials were disposed.

Company officials wanted to show compassion for the homeless, Klosterman said. But once the fires sparked and

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employees faced threats, they “drew the line.”

The first signs were posted after the April floods.

The quarry owners said the homeless needed to remove their belongings from the land and that they could face trespassing charges if they didn't comply.

When the deadline passed in May, a handful of homeless blocked a bulldozer trying to move alongside the homeless camps.

Law enforcement arrived on the scene but didn't make any arrests. Polk County sheriff's deputies told the Statesman Journal the property owner would need to go to court to force out the homeless.

The campers had been on the land for so long they had effectively established residency.

They were removed after the court

proceeding, and, soon after, the bulldozing began.

Somerset Heights was the next property owner to post and go through the courts before razing the camps. Somerset Heights did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

Klosterman said fencing is going around a mining operation as a demarcation and to keep people off the land. Having homeless living on the property violates federal mining rules.

Fry said Somerset Heights also intends to put up a fence along its land, which would box the Fry land between two fences and the slough. It wouldn't make sense to allow the homeless to stay at that point, he said, because it would be illegal to get to and from their camps.

Despite the evictions, city officials are worried about the possibility of confrontations with former campers.

In an email sent the morning of Sept. 5, Johnston of the Parks department warned public works operations manager Mark Becktel that a group of people

in the homeless camp in Wallace along Highway 22 were threatening to fight anyone who encroaches on the camp.

The self-proclaimed leader of this group reportedly brandished a gun and also encouraged people in the camp to vandalize the property.

“We've gotten enough reports that I thought I'd better let you know,” Johnston wrote.

Becktel passed the information to Salem police officials, including Miller and Upkes.

“We informed ODOT of the information and advised them that we would assist them if they did go out into that area,” Upkes told the Statesman Journal. “We were not requested to investigate the information any further.”

Upkes noted that since the email, police haven't gone to the area or gotten reports of similar problems or crimes.

Some routine continues

While the number of campers in Wallace Marine Park has dwindled, in some

ways routine continues.

As usual on a Friday morning, Scaglione found himself searching for food to bring to a community dinner later that night open to all the homeless in Wallace Marine Park. Ford was with him.

But he's recently taken a larger role in the operation.

Scaglione said that, for health reasons, the person who had served as cook had to step down. Faced with the prospect of another service for the homeless closing, Scaglione reached out to previous “guests” for help.

Now, on those Friday nights, all in one location, former campers serve those still outdoors, wherever they may be living.

Contact reporter Connor Radnovich at cradnovich@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6864, or follow him on Twitter at @CDRadnovich.

Contact reporter Jonathan Bach at jbach@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6714, or follow him on Twitter at @jonathanmbach.