

Vandalism, transients plague Alton Baker

Blackberry bushes become home

By JEFF BAKER
Of the Emerald

Vandalism brought by sewer installation and a nettlesome transient population has kept law enforcement personnel busy in Alton Baker park this spring.

There were 53 arrests in Eugene's most popular and accessible park last year, half of them for theft, according to Lane County Parks Division manager Chuck Schrader. There were 12 arrests for alcohol intoxication and possession of marijuana.

A large transient population calls Alton Baker home, Schrader says.

"They consider it free lodging. Some of them build shacks there in the blackberry bushes and stay eight or 10 months," he says.

A device known as a "hobo furnace" keeps the transients warm at night. A coat hanger is pulled apart, hooked to a picnic table and rubbed between the palms to create friction, Schrader says.

Since the park closes at 11 p.m., those spending the night are guilty of trespassing. Vagrancy laws that used to send many of them to warmer quarters in the county jail have been declared unconstitutional.

Schrader doesn't blame vagrants for a more costly and dangerous problem — malicious vandalism. About half the large lamps in the park and Pre's Trails are broken, Schrader says.

"Some people consider it their life's ambition to break those things. There's 220 volts going through there so someday somebody's going to

snap one of those poles and electrocute themselves."

The lights cost about \$240 each, Schrader says.

Concern about safety in the park area has caused a group of joggers to form Oregon Trail Observers, says county sheriff's office representative Marcia Morgan.

The group patrols the park in the early morning and late evening hours, Morgan says. However, the rose garden area of Skinner's Butte Park actually is much more dangerous, Schrader says.

Another aggravation for park users soon will end. The six-mile sewer line being installed will be completed in six to eight weeks, Metropolitan Wastewater Commission representative Sarah Bachhuver says.

Sewer construction caused a few problems from joggers resentful about having their regular route disrupted. A few responded by stealing construction signs and knocking over barricades, Eugene COP team spokesperson Don Ellingson says.

"They were sharp-looking new signs," Bachhuver says. "We managed to trace a couple of them down and they were hanging in kids' rooms. They must have thought it was cool to hang them on their walls."

The sewer construction contractor — Wildish Construction — hired a private security firm to guard their equipment at night.

Ellingson and Schrader both believe park security problems will increase as the weather gets warmer.

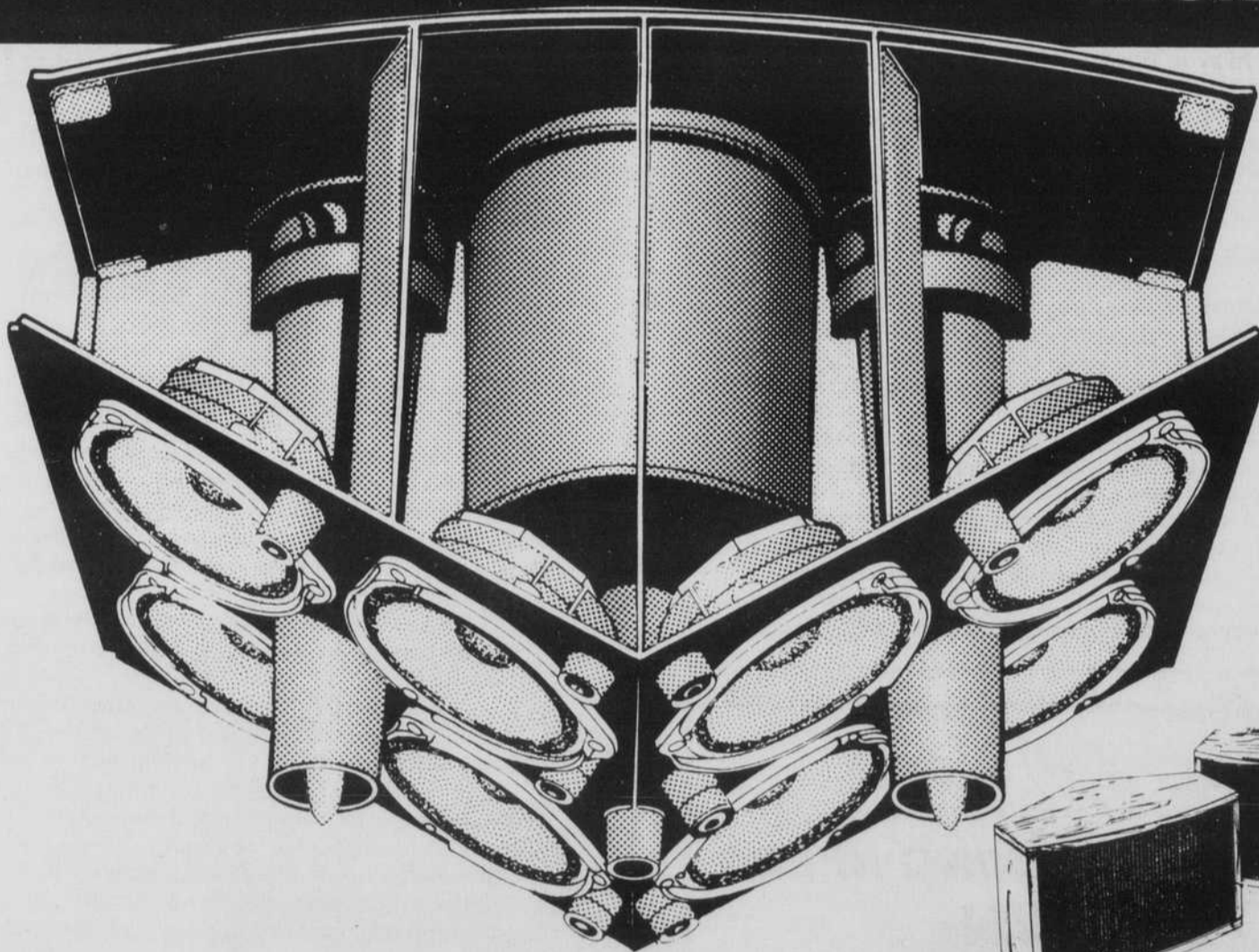


Photos by Steve Dykes

Litter is another recurrent problem in Alton Baker Park.

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