

Off Campus

Transients irk neighbors

By David Brown
Of the Emerald

A dirty-looking man stares at the grass below his battered boots while resting in a small park on East 14th Avenue.

Shortly afterward, he shoulders a bulky pack, fusses with greasy tangles of long black hair that are caught in the straps and then shuffles away.

A minute later, a youngish girl in sunglasses crosses the small park, her hands in the pockets of a down jacket.

Barely audible, a comment rises: "Where have I been all your life." Without responding, she walks quickly, her cleated boot-heels clicking.

The speaker huddled on a nearby bench resumes coughing, spitting and talking hoarsely to a friend.

The scene took place during a recent lunch hour.

It characterizes the problem with "transients" congregating in the community-owned park. This is a problem that has troubled the West University Neighbors since residents completed the park's construction in 1979, says Marshall Landman, WUN's refinement plan administrator.

"There is no reason why anyone should feel harassed in that park," Landman says. It is the only park in the neighborhood, and it belongs to the neighborhood residents, he says.

By spring of 1981 "a lot of vagrants were hanging around in that park — a lot — and really harassing a lot of people, especially women," he says.

The community requested that the city prohibit the drinking of alcoholic beverages in the park. The prohibition became official in August 1981.

Subsequently, neighbors called police often about vagrants drinking in the park, Landman says.

"This summer was really great," he says. Students used the park in greater numbers than previously, making the park a valuable part of the community, rather than anybody's hangout, Landman says.

A study on vagrancy was submitted to the Eugene City Council Wednesday. The problem of vagrancy has increased "with Eugene's growth as an urban center and the recent rise in unemployment," reads the study, which was submitted by council member Mark Lindberg.

It's a problem that can't just be driven out of town as some would like — vagrancy is inherent to economic recession, Lindberg says.

During an era of unemployment, cutbacks in assistance programs and reduced government funding of institutions, many people who live "marginally" end up on the street, he says.

"Some people, of course, choose to be vagrants, and some of their behavior is distinctly anti-social. . . . In contrast, most vagrants, especially older age groups, prefer to be peaceful and withdrawn," reads the study.

Lindberg, who represents the West University area, says the city must deal with vagrancy — "the human side of economic recession" — as well as economic diversification.

Communities must signal to vagrants what types of behavior are acceptable, Lindberg says. Neighborhoods might hold meetings and inform residents on how to respond to requests by vagrants begging for spare change, he says.

His report recommends that the city form a task force to improve the city's understanding of vagrancy and related city problems such as law enforcement. The report recommends the task force identify needed services for vagrants and ways to coordinate public and private efforts to deal with vagrancy.

The city council unanimously approved the proposed task force.

Police officer Bill Speicher says certain members of the Eugene vagrant population become very familiar to police officers. On responding to a report of a disturbance of persons drinking in an alley, "we'll know these guys on a first name basis. You'll say, 'Hey, John, what's going on?'" he says.



Photo by Mark Pynes

This transient named Ray, with all his worldly belongings in a burlap bag, spends much of his time panhandling in the West University neighborhood. He charged the photographer 15 cents to take his picture.

On Campus

University takes steps to discourage transients

By Richard Burr
Of the Emerald

With the lure of a warm place to watch TV and free hot showers, transients are making themselves comfortable in the student union building and in residence halls, much to the concern of EMU and housing office officials.

So a small battle has ensued. Measures are being considered that will make life at the University less appealing to outsiders but maintain services to students who belong here. One measure seems to have worked.

Since the EMU Board had the television, tables and chairs removed from the EMU Fishbowl TV room about two weeks ago, transients are not congregating in the union building as much, says Dick Vander Schaaf, EMU night manager.

"For the moment, the problem has been solved," EMU Director Adell McMillan says.

Lounge transients have been a continual problem, but this year the problem worsened, McMillan says. Two fist fights and several complaints of drunkenness, which was not a problem in the past, were reported, she says.

Relocating the television will be a problem because other possible locations also are accessible to transients wandering in off the street, McMil-

lan says.

Board member Daniel Cohen suggested Monday the television be moved to the Recreation Center lobby, with the TV to be turned off at 3 p.m. when the transients enter the building. The board needs to decide whether the proposal will solve the transient problem, says Paul Rudinsky, board member.

The transients also congregate in the Fishbowl cafeteria and sleep in the basement lobby near the ASUO office, McMillan says. The EMU administration can do little to prevent drifters from using the building because it is semi-public, she says.

Transients used to congregate at an all-night restaurant on the Millrace, McMillan says. But the restaurant closed, and the EMU became the place with the latest open hours, she says.

One transient says he comes to the EMU for the reasons McMillan gives.

The transient, who wished to remain anonymous, says he sits in the EMU because it is warm, semi-public and open "a hell of a lot longer than the municipal library." He says he also comes to the union when he is "blue."

"I seem to be tolerated by students here," the man says. "I'm exposed to other people's lives."

"I don't feel like an outcast here," he adds.

When he walks around the downtown mall, however, people either ignore him or seem scared of him, the transient says.

But transients do cause some problems, say University students and administrators.

One female student, who requested anonymity, says one transient is in love with her girlfriend, and he constantly bothers her about the friend's health. But he is not representative of typical transients, she says.

"Most of them are friendly, but not overly friendly," says the student. "They don't bother people who don't want to be bothered."

Marjory Ramey, assistant director of housing, makes a similar appraisal of the transients. She says transients are "relatively peaceful" but are a "constant irritation" to the residents.

"There's always a concern that they won't always be honest," Ramey says.

Transients enter the residence halls to sleep, shower or eat a free meal, she says. All dormitories have locked doors after certain hours, but unsuspecting students either let transients in or prop the doors open, Ramey says.

The number of transients seeking showers has increased the past two years since the physical education department installed its security system,

she says. Vagabonds regularly used the P.E. facilities because there was no identification check, Ramey says.

Several unauthorized women used to use the showers and "made no bones about it," she adds.

The transients also attempt to slip through the meal line, Ramey says. To counter this, students are required to show identification at every meal, which was not done previously, she says.

Food workers also doublecheck people who look out of place, Ramey says. Some transients can be identified because they do not walk with the same confidence students do, she adds.

Within the next year, the housing department will install an automatic identification system to further reduce the amount of cheaters, Ramey says. The system will use University computers, she says.

Identifying transients has become easier because students are dressing more formally, Ramey says. During the late 1960s, it was difficult to differentiate between students and transients, she says.

But even with easier identification and other measures, the problem will never be solved, Ramey says. The residents change annually and educating them is a constant process, she says.