

BRETT ROGERS, HOLDING AN ITALIAN PLUM,
SMILES LOOKING AT HIS TREE
Photo by Bentley Freeman

UNHOUSED AND UNWELCOME

Cottage Grove evicted 100-plus unhoused residents at two campsites, pushing them into a dog park, after a deal between the city and St. Vincent de Paul fell through **BY BENTLEY FREEMAN AND EMILY ROGERS**

Brett Rogers bends down to pick strawberries from the garden he's tended since the spring. He points to lettuce, raspberries and grapevines on a rustic trellis. A towering sunflower bows its head. A bulging scarecrow made of a stuffed yellow shirt and red pants crouches next to his garden.

"We had birds come in before I made this scarecrow," says Rogers, wearing a gray muscle tank that reads "rural and proud." He says, "I change up his clothes and move him around the garden, because birds don't get used to it. They don't come in the garden at all."

Rogers is most proud of his pumpkin patch. Four small pumpkins — one that's grown the size of a beach ball — peek out from beneath the vines. He marvels at it and flashes a toothless, gummy smile.

Rogers has lived in a tent along North Douglas Avenue in Cottage Grove for the past year and half along with 60 other unhoused people on a city-owned lot. It's August 22, and he knows that the next morning, Cottage Grove Police and Cottage Grove Public Works crews will arrive and sweep the lot clean.

It's the latest strike in a political battle this city of 10,713 has waged over its estimated 150 unhoused residents. Each turn in the fight — which included seeing three City Council members recalled from office on July 30 — has moved closer to this moment. Police and work crews are set to clear another lot a half mile away where another 60 unhoused people are camped.

Cottage Grove officials issued the order to clear the sites on August 8, but had no plan for where the unhoused residents could go. A grant-funded homeless shelter that has the capacity for 40 people sits empty, the result of the chaos at City Hall over the city's unhoused.

Officials have improvised a desperate proposal: Unhoused people evicted from the two lots can camp overnight in a nearby dog park, but they need to clear out by 7 am each day.

"It doesn't make sense to make a tent up at night, just to break it down in the morning," Rogers says. "They're pretty much looking down on us like we're dog shit."

Towns across Oregon have sought to toughen their treatment of the unhoused since the June U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a Grants Pass case allowing cities to ticket and jail anybody for sleeping or camping outside, even when municipalities fail to provide enough shelter.

Rogers, 44, has been dismantling his camp over the past few days. He shakes dirt out of a patch of gray rug that had once been white. Rogers has lived in Cottage Grove for 18 years, 10 of them unhoused.

"I don't want to leave the city. I don't want to leave here, but there's no options," Rogers says. "I can't go anywhere."

COTTAGE GROVE ONCE HAD A HUMANE STRATEGY to help its unhoused residents. In October 2022, the city opened what locals call the Highway 99 shelter, a robin's egg blue building near the Cottage Grove Riding Club and

Rodeo. The city signed a contract to manage the shelter with Carry It Forward, a social services nonprofit serving Eugene, Springfield and rural areas.

The Highway 99 shelter reached capacity within three months. The Cottage Grove City Council then approved overflow sites. One on 12th Street opened in December 2022 behind the Dari Mart and U.S. Post Office, while the other on North Douglas Avenue opened in February 2023 next to the city's public works building. Neither location had an on-site manager.

Councilor Greg Ervin says the city needed to take harsher action with the camps sooner. "My thought all along was we just got to double down on code violation," he says, "That shouldn't all fall on public safety officers."

Eugene Weekly reached out to Mayor Candace Solesbee about her efforts to lead Cottage Grove through this turbulent time. She declined to comment.

Then the money ran out for the shelter. Cottage Grove had covered Carry It Forward's contract using money from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act, a federal program that Congress passed to help communities recover economically following the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We ran out of money as a city, so we had lobbied the governor and the Legislature to help keep that funded," Fleck says. Their efforts failed.

If Cottage Grove didn't figure out how to house its homeless, the Highway 99 shelter would close and the 30 people who stayed there would have no choice but to pitch tents on the two overflow sites.