



COTTAGE GROVE PUBLIC WORKS EMPLOYEES COMPLETE THE CHAIN LINK FENCE SURROUNDING THE 12TH STREET SITE, AN HOUR AFTER THE EVICTION NOTICE
Photo by Bentley Freeman

not going in expecting the city to do something for us. We're looking at, how do we partner with the city to help the vulnerable in their community?"

Former City Councilor Mike Fleck says the St. Vincent de Paul plan was the solution that took care of Cottage Grove's needs. All the City Council had to do was say yes. "What a blessing that this agency was stepping up and wanting to come in," Fleck says. "I bet 90 percent or more of our issues would have just completely been resolved."

But the plan soon unraveled.

ON FEB. 23, Cottage Grove resident Michael Borke, a project manager for a local drywall company, filed a recall petition against city councilors Fleck, Chalice Savage and Alex Dreher.

In the recall filing, Borke said he was seeking to remove the councilors because they had done nothing to clean up the two homeless campsites. Borke had tried a recall months earlier but failed to gather enough signatures. This time, Borke collected more than the 654 signatures he needed. In late June, elections officials set the recall vote for the end of July.

The councilors now under threat of recall — Fleck, Savage and Dreher — all favored the St. Vincent de Paul plan. The recall put their political futures in doubt. But the council was supposed to vote on the St. Vincent de Paul plan on July 8, before the recall election. The city still had time to act.

Then more events undermined the plan.

The first was the June 28 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the Grants Pass case. That took pressure off local governments to add shelter spaces. The City Council held the July 8 meeting to review the St. Vincent de Paul plan, but city officials told the nonprofit some city councilors were not yet ready to vote. It's unclear what role Mayor Solesbee played in delaying the vote, as she declined to comment.

To people who disliked the existing campsites, the St. Vincent de Paul plan seemed an unnecessary step for the city. Councilor Ervin did not favor continuing the two campsites, which would have continued for a while under the plan.

"We should do the minimum," Ervin tells *EW*, "and leave the space open for groups, organizations, churches, that have this in their mission."

Ervin played a direct role in souring the St. Vincent de Paul plan.

On July 16, Ervin showed up unannounced at the St. Vincent de Paul's Eugene Service Station, which provides emergency services during the day while nearby dusk-to-dawn sites are closed.

Now, Ervin says he simply wanted a firsthand look at how the nonprofit operated.

"I wanted to be able to answer 'Yes, I talked to people. And this is what I'm basing my decision on,'" he says. "What's the impact here? What might that look like when it comes to Cottage Grove?"

St. Vincent de Paul officials tell a different story. They say Ervin knocked on the doors of people living near the Eugene Service Station. Neighbors complained that Ervin quizzed them about living close to a St. Vincent de Paul homeless shelter.

With the threat of the recall and Ervin's behavior, St. Vincent De Paul officials had seen enough. The nonprofit sent Cottage Grove officials a letter on July 25 announcing that it was withdrawing the plan.

"We were not able to move forward in Cottage Grove, largely because there was not a uniform community interest," Cartledge says. She says the looming recall event and Ervin's actions helped drive the nonprofit's decision.

Five days later, Cottage Grove voters recalled Fleck, Savage and Dreher with 61 percent of the vote.

IT'S 11:30 IN THE MORNING on August 22, the eviction day. The deadline passed 30 minutes ago.

Employees of Cottage Grove Public Works, wearing neon green shirts, had moved in right on time and assembled a make-shift fence, its sections linked with padlocks and zipties.

A dozen 12th Street camp residents sit slumped with their belongings, watching the workers.

Armstrong is among them. She'd returned from helping move her neighbor's trailer to find hers had been towed away. Not even a warning ahead of time.

"When I got back, I was angry. I was very," she pauses, "angry."

She had only 15 minutes to pack her own belongings. She now stands watching the workers while holding Cowlick, her neighbor's gray and white kitten. Cowlick stretches and looks up at Armstrong's dejected face.

Amid the sadness, Armstrong finds that the former camp residents still look to her for help. A woman asks Armstrong if it'd be safe to store her belongings along the outside of the fence. "I imagine so," she says.

A Cottage Grove resident who came to see the site clearance asks what she could do to help. "I think once you come back, if you got some food for us, you'll probably do well," Armstrong says.

The requests for Armstrong's help continue.

Armstrong says she's strong, but she's disappointed she's had to leave her own property behind again after being evicted from her previous two homes. This time, she got out with some of her belongings but had to leave something invaluable.

In the mad scramble to get out in the nick of time, Armstrong forgot to grab a picture her grandmother had given her and the other grandkids, with a special handwritten note on each. She says her grandmother passed away earlier this year, in April.

Remembering that item and what it meant, she pleaded with Cottage Grove Police to let her retrieve it because they said — per the eviction notices — they would hold onto items for 30 days.

"They told me that they were not going to let anybody in, and they weren't letting anybody get anything, because we'd had plenty of time by then to get it," she says. "And so it was at that point I knew that it was a complete loss."

Armstrong says she doesn't know what the future holds. "I am so upset about it," she says, "and I don't even know what to do."

She still has no place to live.

AFTER THE RECALL VOTE, Cottage Grove officials wasted little time ordering that the two overflow camps, North Douglas and 12th Street, be cleared.

The city posted a notice in both camps that residents needed to be out by August 22. Officials say they will continue to keep the dog park open for overnight camping through September. Cottage Grove officials plan to re-open the 12th Street site for a limited number of campers.

According to Rogers, only three people stayed at the dusk-to-dawn dog park the day after it opened.

City officials say they have no idea where the 100-plus unhoused people who lived at the two camps have gone.

Armstrong says she still doesn't have anywhere permanent to stay. She's been bouncing around between truck stops and camping grounds — hoping she can find a more permanent solution. "It's just really unfortunate, because it really, truly feels like it's now illegal to be homeless," she says.

In the days following the August 22 eviction, city crews piled abandoned propane tanks, tents, mattresses and other debris at both sites. On Monday, August 26, bulldozers arrived.

That morning, Brett Rogers sat under a tree near the North Douglas site with other former residents. A sign in front of him read, "Poor, homeless n hungry please help!!!!!" handwritten in black ink across cardboard.

Rogers had left on eviction day to camp under the Swinging Bridge off of River Road. A city worker spotted him, and moments later the police ordered him to leave.

Rogers then tried Trailhead Park, next to what used to be the 12th Street campsite, where he was met by the chief of police. "The chief of police says the only option I have is outside of the city or Eugene," Rogers says.

But, Rogers says he doesn't want to leave the town he's been a part of for 18 years.

Now he was back at North Douglas. Rogers had walked back onto the site that morning and harvested what he could from his garden. The bucket in front of him held green peppers, one tomato, one squash, and a few of the smaller pumpkins. The giant pumpkin he was so proud of, Rogers couldn't remove it before the chief of police chased him off.

Rogers had been watering his garden from his bucket when he'd been spotted by a public works employee.

"Why are you watering your garden if we're just going to bulldoze them down?" the worker asked him.

"Because I cared for this for six months," Rogers said he replied. "I nurtured the soil, I worked hard, I enriched the soil. I spent a lot of time on this garden. 'Why am I doing it? Because I don't want you guys to bulldoze it down.'"

When the bulldozers rumbled toward his garden, Rogers looked away. "As long as you see the sunflower up," Rogers says, "the garden is still there. You see the sunflower down, and the garden's gone."

Every few minutes he stood and looked back. During one glance he spotted the sunflower, ripped from the ground and sitting on a dirt pile. Then he saw a bulldozer's blade approach his garden, drop its blade and crush his giant pumpkin.

"They've torn my world down," Rogers says. "It's not gonna be normal tonight, it's not gonna be normal tomorrow, because it's all gone."