

# Homeless could be causing CARD rent loss



CARD employee Aaron Haar shows the litter and homeless encampments that are common along Big Chico Creek behind the Community Center. The area shown is city property next to the lawn used by CARD for events

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By Laura Urseny

[lurseny@chicoer.com](mailto:lurseny@chicoer.com)">lurseny@chicoer.com, @LauraUrseny on Twitter

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**CHICO >>** A big grassy meadow in the back of Chico Community Center on Vallombrosa Avenue has been used for weddings, retirement gatherings and parties for decades, but Chico's homeless problem is being felt there.

Just about every morning, pockets of homeless people stir in the area, by the picnic sites, and on a visitor bench next to Big Chico Creek. Their areas are littered with signs of habitation and waste, from both humans and dogs, among other materials.

It's a daily sight for staff at the Chico Area Recreation and Park District office, wedged between Vallombrosa Avenue and Big Chico Creek, across from the U.S. Post Office.

"The homeless are there," CARD General Manager Jerry Haynes told the Enterprise-Record this week. "Their presence varies. Sometimes it's a small presence, sometimes there's a lot of items, like bikes, backpacks, other things."

Haynes said CARD does not have the authority to ask someone to move if they are sitting on city property, which runs between the bike path and Big Chico Creek. CARD's authority is from the bike path to the Community Center. If litter is left on CARD property, CARD staff cleans up.

Besides the daily occurrence of trash, the homeless presence means something else to CARD — possibly a decline in business.

CARD has lost about \$5,000 in rental business at the center over the last fiscal year, according to Executive Assistant Jennifer Marciales, in a presentation to the CARD board this month.

Marciales said she's been asked about the homeless situation from prospective renters when she takes calls or is giving a tour.

"We do assure them that we will have security and staff on site (during the event). Both do a great job at events," she said.

GM Haynes noted later, "To say that (revenue) reduction is because of the homeless is not accurate," but he admits they've had an impact.

"When we have potential customers who come to the center and are looking at the possibilities of renting the center for weddings, meetings or bar mitzvahs, they have a certain expectation. Sometimes their expectation is impacted by seeing homeless there. When they see homeless there, sometimes it affects their decision," he said.

Marciales said the homeless are asked to move along during events. "They are respectful. We ask them to leave and they do," she said.

Haynes stressed there has never been a "significant problem" with the homeless that "had a negative impact" for CARD.

"They are citizens, free to be in open space and green space. We don't take action unless something requires it. The park is their park as well. We don't move them out to move them out," he said, noting there is a city regulation against overnight camping in Bidwell Park.

"We're determined to promote (the center) but we're expecting another loss this year," Marciales told the board last week.

CARD is considering asking the city to move the bench by the creek that attracts homeless camping to another location. The board hopes a rose garden suggested for that area might help discourage the homeless too.

*Contact reporter Laura Urseny at 896-7756.*