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Once heavily wooded area of Buena Vista Park has been stripped of foliage (Photo: R. Pruzan)

The Battle of Buena Vista

Cops, Parks Dept., Citizens Join Forces To Stop Sex

Uniformed, Plainclothes Police Patrol Park, Run Police Checks on Men Found in Park

by Brian Jones

Police harassment of gay people has returned 1950s style, to Buena Vista Park. Police are stopping and questioning gay men for being in the park in the middle of the day. Plainclothes police decoys are also wandering wooded trails, posing as gay men interested in sex.

The questioning of men by uniformed officers includes a computerized check of the subject's driver's license, and recording of the subject's home address, home telephone, social security number, place of employment, and telephone number at work. This information is recorded in a special notebook carried by officers for this purpose.

The Buena Vista police sweeps are part of a wider effort to end cruising—and perhaps clear all gay people entirely—from the park. San Francisco has spent \$170,000 to raze trees and clear shrubs this year.

The city is not alone in chopping trees. At least two private individuals have been clearing areas of the park near their homes, using chainsaws. This activity is in direct violation of city law. However, police have issued no citations—even though uniformed officers have sometimes been nearby while the illegal cutting was taking place.

Police are well aware of the cutting, though: at night, police squad cars drive into the park and officers fill their trunks with newly cut wood. The wood is a suitable size for firewood.

One resident of Buena Vista West Street has cleared several areas of the park with his chainsaw. He keeps stacks of the cut wood in his back yard. He has been reported to officials of the city Parks and Recreation Department, but Parks and Rec. has not issued a citation against him.

In fact, the Parks and Rec. Dept. uses the man as one of its citizen advisory panel members—even while department officials know he has broken the law by cutting areas of the park.

The battle for Buena Vista Park heated up last month when a dozen gay men, swept by police from trails on the sunny southeast side of the park, gathered at the top and yelled insults. "Pigs! Pigs! Pigs!" they yelled, as a squad car backed down the service road leading out of the park.

'UNSAVORY'

What was once an unspoken effort to end the gay presence in the park has come out of the closet. Everything from danger

to children, to erosion, has been blamed on gays during community meetings regarding the park.

"The park is not safe for young children—even with the accompaniment of their teachers and parents," complained one woman at a community meeting last month. "That question must be addressed."

On a comment form which she filled out later, the woman wrote that she seldom used the park "due to unsafe, unsavory circumstances."

In fact, there have been no documented cases of child molestation in Buena Vista Park.

The latest push was prompted by the completion of Park Hill, a luxury condominium development in the former St. Joseph's Hospital on the southeast side of the park. The development offers condominiums in the \$150,000 to \$350,000 price range, boasting of views of the downtown skyline—or, on the other side, of Buena Vista Park.

Widescale cutting of the park at the behest of the city began about 18 months ago when the condo restoration began. The result was that many formerly secluded areas were bared to view from the condominiums across the street.

The result is that "I am seeing excessive public sex that goes on right outside my window. I want it cleaned up," said one Park Hill resident.

The condos fronting the park have not been selling well. While the portions of the building facing the city are mostly occupied now, no more than half a dozen of the units fronting the park display visible signs of occupancy.

'DISASTER'

The widescale cutting has left

whole areas of the park bare. While the Parks and Rec. Dept. officially says that only dead trees and shrubs are being cut, the reality is that at least half of the cutting is being done to healthy foliage.

The private illegal wood cutters are also chainsawing stands of trees and shrubs not based on their health, but on their proximity to the cutters' own homes. Areas perceived to be "hang-outs" for gays also have been hard hit by people acting without the city's permission.

All this may create "an environmental disaster," one nearby resident said at the May community meeting. "There won't be any trees up there in two or three years at the rate things are going."

Parks and Rec. officials acknowledged at that meeting that the tree cutting was proceeding, even though the department has not won approval for the funds it needs to replant the park.

"My fear is that you are going to run out of money after you take it apart and before you can put it back together again," said a nearby resident.

Indeed, the park today looks like a puzzle taken apart and strewn across the 36-acre hilltop site at the city's geographic center.

Piles of wood chips, chopped shrubbery, and tree limbs cover the hilltop. Some of the piles are more than 10 feet high and 50 feet in diameter. Much of the refuse has been left where it lies for almost a year.

That problem, one resident worried, presents a fire hazard as the summer dry season wears on. "I'm worried if you don't get that debris out of there soon, God forbid, the whole park could catch

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fire." There is no irrigation at Buena Vista Park, no running water of any sort beyond the restroom near the tennis courts on the northeast side near the street.

'SUSPICIOUS'

This reporter visited Buena Vista Park at 4 p.m. one sunny day last week. Wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, I climbed onto a tree limb about four feet from the ground in a sunny spot overlooking the Park Hill condominium. The area seemed secluded and no one else was nearby.

Five minutes later, a uniformed police sergeant from Park Station, star number 945, approached. He asked me for identification; I produced my driver's license. Over the radio, he ran a check on my license to determine if I had any outstanding arrest warrants. I did not.

"There has been a lot of nasty stuff going on up here in this park and I am here to clean it up," the sergeant said, as he waited for the radio check to be completed. I had not said anything until this time.

He then pulled out a blue notebook and asked me if the home address on the license was accurate. I said it was and he then recorded my address in the blue

notebook, along with my name. He then asked me my social security number, my place of employment, and the telephone number where I worked.

I provided all this information, then asked what was the purpose of this questioning.

"You are in a suspicious area," he replied. I asked if I was being registered as a suspicious person. He did not answer.

A few moments later, the computer check on my license came back over the radio and I was reported to be clear of any criminal record. The sergeant returned my license and told me "to move to a more open area of the park—where the view is better."

I responded that I liked the view right where I was and did not move. The sergeant left.

About 20 minutes later, I left the park. I passed the sergeant on the trail, where he was conferring with two plainclothes officers. I had observed these two men walking in and out of the bushes, looking at the few gay men who were in the park that day. They appeared to be making an attempt to cruise but to my eye they were not too convincing.

I left for home, marvelling at the notion that in San Francisco in 1986 I had been documented as being "suspicious" for sitting in a park on a sunny afternoon. ●

B. Jones



Residents of the Buena Vista Park area voiced their concerns at a recent meeting
(Photo: R. Pruzan)