



PenMet Parks

The DeMolay Sandspit, one of two PenMet parks on Fox Island that are about to lose their resident hosts.

Fox Islanders ask PenMet to rethink eviction of park hosts

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TACOMA

Residents of Fox Island lined up at a PenMet Park Board meeting this week to ask the board to overturn or delay the district's decision to evict the resident hosts from two island parks.

"PenMet is fixing something that isn't a problem," said Peggy Power, who lives next to one of the parks and has organized an online petition against the move.

The park district sent registered letters July 16 to the park hosts at the Fox Island Fishing Pier and the Demolay Sandspit Nature Preserve, ordering both to be gone by Oct. 1. Park hosts live in their own trailers or modular homes and perform duties like opening and closing the parks, picking up litter, cleaning restrooms and keeping an eye out at night. The district pays their utilities, but no salary.

Nine Fox Island homeowners, from both ends of the island, told the board

at the meeting Tuesday, Aug. 3, that the district is making a mistake. They said they were worried about a resumption of the beach bonfires and drinking parties that plagued the island before the hosts were installed.

"It's seems like a no-brainer to me. If it ain't broke, don't fix it," said Martin Miller, who lives on Ozette Drive near the fishing pier.

Miller and others argued that Ed and Lynn Lewis, the host couple at the fishing pier, and Brett Marlo, the host at the sandspit, keep the properties clean and safe and shoo away teenage trespassers at night.

"I don't know what's going to happen when Ed and Lynn are gone," said Miller. "They've been keeping the bad stuff away. This is going to be a problem. It's a bad decision that's going to have an adverse impact."

Before the host program began 17 years ago. "there were big fires and big parties" at the two beaches, said Dave Mumper, who said he has lived on the island 20 years. "I don't want to go back to

that again. For the life of me, I cannot figure out why PenMet would be trying to get rid of a program that is working so well."

REFERRED TO ONLINE FAQ

Ally Bujacich, the park executive director, has declined to talk about the decision or reveal who made it, but the district posted an unsigned "Frequently Asked Questions" document last week that said the host's duties would be assumed by the regular district maintenance crew.

The anonymous FAQ stressed that parks hosts are "camping on public land" without payment, and minimized the duties they perform.

"Park hosts are not responsible for and do not perform landscape or maintenance tasks. Park hosts do not enforce park regulations or prevent prohibited activities. Park hosts are not security guards," the FAQ says.

The FAQ said the district will replace the park hosts with "increased presence" of maintenance personnel and will install

security cameras at the fishing pier, the sandspit, and Peninsula Gardens. The district has four full-time maintenance employees for 11 parks, augmented by student part-timers during the summer.

If residents see problems, the FAQ suggests, they should call the Pierce County Sheriff's Department.

That did not please many of the island residents.

"So many things happened there in the night before we had the hosts," said Vienna Lucas, who lives near the sandspit. "I don't want to be calling the Sheriff as often as I think I will have to. I don't want my woods to go up in flames because someone started a foolish fire."

Todd Fischer, another resident, noted that "Fox Island is an under-covered area, as far as policing goes. We're kind of on our own out there. We're about as far away from anything as you can get, and the police response is always going to be slow."

"You can call the police," said Bob McNeil, who lives on Bella Bella Drive near the sandspit. "But it's not going to be a high priority for them. They're not going to be there in an hour, or even two hours."

A PROMISE MADE?

Julie Higgins said she and her husband, Ken, have lived next to the fishing pier "since just after the Korean War, when it was a fruit orchard at the end of a dirt road." In removing the park hosts, she said, PenMet would be breaking a promise made to residents in 1992, when the property was owned by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"At first, we (island residents) were very vocal that we didn't want the park," she said. "But the fisheries people were very

convincing and promised us there would always be a caretaker in residence."

The fishing pier and its 5.5 acres of property were later transferred from Fish and Wildlife to Pierce County and from the county to the Peninsula Metropolitan Park District when it was formed in 2004. The DeMolay Sandspit Nature Preserve was purchased in 2010.

Higgins and several other speakers questioned the district's contention that the change would result in cost savings.

"The opening and closing of the park alone would be worth whatever little amount the district pays in utilities," said Higgins.

"I would really like to see the analysis of the costs the district says it has done," said Michael Chandler, who lives on 14th Avenue NW. "I can't see how doing without supervision can be done less expensively."

MORATORIUM SOUGHT

Several residents complained at the board meeting about the lack of public notice or discussion by the park board.

"The first we heard about this was when it was already happening," said Julie Higgins.

Nor were the park hosts consulted, said Ed Lewis, the host at the fishing pier.

"As park hosts, we have never been consulted about this decision, either by members of the park board, or the staff," he said. He complained that the district's FAQ was inaccurate and "appears to be biased to disparage the current hosts."

Several of those who spoke asked the board to delay the decision until a public meeting on the issue can be held. Power, who has been leading the effort, said there have been more than 300 signatures to an online petition asking for a morato-

rium and a public meeting.

"Put this decision off until you talk to the residents, talk to the people most closely involved with the parks," urged Glenn Hansen, who is Power's husband.

"It would be nice to take some time and think this decision over," said Fischer.

Four of the five commissioners were at the meeting in the future Community Recreation Center. Amanda Babich, the board president, was absent.

Commissioner Laurel Kingsbury thanked the residents for their comments.

"I really appreciate some of our citizens giving really thorough comments," she said. "We hear you and we take your concerns seriously."

In other business, the park board:

- Extended the contract of Louise Tieman, the interim finance and human resources manager, for four months.

- Adopted a policy requiring criminal background checks for all current and prospective employees, volunteers, vendors and independent contractors who may have unsupervised access to children under the age of 18, persons with development disabilities or vulnerable adults. The policy, which is mandated by state law, also applies to anyone collecting or disbursing cash or processing credit or debit card transactions.

- Voted to approve an agreement with Pierce County under which PenMet will receive a share of the county's second 0.25 percent Real Estate Excise Tax. Eric Guenther, planning and special projects manager, estimated PenMet's share at \$120,000.

The next park board meeting will be Sept. 7.