

PenMet evicts Fox Island park hosts, leaving neighbors angry and dismayed

[BY KERRY WEBSTER](#)

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Park host Brett Marlo locks the gate to the DeMolay Sandspit Nature Preserve on Fox Island for the evening Thursday, July 22, 2021. She recently received notification that PenMet Parks is terminating the 17-year-old park host program. Behind her is a 200-foot-square “tiny house” she designed to live on the property that she will be taking with her. The unpaid hosts live rent-free in return for services like opening and closing the park gates, picking up litter, doing some minor maintenance and providing security at night.

Ed Lewis and his wife, Lynn, have kept the park at the Fox Island Fishing Pier for six years, living in a fifth-wheel trailer on the grounds, cutting the weeds, picking up the trash and shooping away teenage revelers who climb the fence after dark.

On the other end of the Island, Brett Marlo has done the same for the DeMolay Sandspit Nature Preserve, living in a 200-foot-square “tiny house” with her two young daughters while she keeps an eye on the 3.5-acre sandspit with its crabs and herons.

Last Friday, both received a registered letter from PenMet Parks giving them until Oct. 1 to get out.

“Please remove your living quarters and personal belongings and restore the property and landscaping to its original condition on or before that date,” the letter said. “Please also remove any infrastructure required to support your temporary dwelling, including but not limited to wiring, piping and foundations or other structural substrates.”

PenMet Executive Director Ally Bujacich said in the letter the park district is terminating the 17-year-old park host program because it is “no longer the most effective method to assist in operating these District assets.”

Then she thanked the park hosts for their service.

VOLUNTEERS AT THREE PARKS

Since 2004, the district has maintained hosts at the two Fox Island parks and Peninsula Gardens, a 10-acre park on Wollochet Drive that hosts a farmers’ market. The unpaid hosts live rent-free in return for services like opening and closing the park gates, picking up litter, doing some minor maintenance and providing security at night. (The couple at Peninsula Gardens left about two months ago and have not been replaced.)

The district has told neighbors such chores will now be performed by its regular four-person maintenance crew, which is augmented during the summer by part-time students.

Bujacich did not respond to a request for comment, nor to detailed questions sent by email. At her request, The Gateway held this story for her answers, but by Friday they had not come. On Saturday, she directed The Gateway to an unsigned “frequently asked questions” posting on the district web page.

In that posting, the district stressed that parks hosts are “camping on public land” without payment, and minimizes the duties they perform. It implied that they were not doing a good job, and that regular park maintenance employees would do better in the long run. Cameras would be installed, it said, to watch over the parks at night.

NEIGHBORS FEAR PARTY BEACHES

The unexpected change left Fox Island neighbors bewildered and angry. “This makes no sense,” said Peggy Power, a veterinarian who lives adjacent to the Fishing Pier Park. “These people are working for free. All they receive from the district is their utilities. It’s a bargain, and they have been doing a wonderful job.”

Power and her husband, Glenn Hansen, have lived next to the park on Ozette Drive for 11 years. Before the host program began, she said, both the fishing pier and the sandspit were frequent targets of vandals and teenagers who would climb the fence at night to build fires and drink. Now, she’s afraid those days will return.

“If I’m a kid, I’m ready to go out and party on the sandspit,” she said. “And there’ll be nobody there to stop me.”

A POLITICAL SUBPLOT

There’s a political subplot as well. Lewis, the host at the fishing pier, was once a construction manager at the park district. His job was eliminated last year after what he described as one too many disagreements with board members. He told The Gateway last week he had always expected his tenure as a park host would not last too much longer.

“They wanted to get rid of me, but unfortunately the only way to do that legally was to terminate the whole program,” he said. “I’m sorry for the lady at the sandspit.”

Besides the T-shaped 1,200-square foot fishing pier, the park also has 5.5 acres of grounds with paved pathways and handrails, restrooms and 635 feet of sandy beach.

Lewis said he and his wife open the gates in the morning, clean the restrooms, hose off the piers, pick up the litter that collects during the day, and keep an eye out for trespassers after the gate is locked at sundown.

“Parties are the biggest thing with kids,” he said. “One time I found about 15 kids climbing over the fence — some were crawling under it,” he recalled. “They said, ‘Oh, we heard there’s a big party down at the pier.’”

Hansen, the park neighbor, says Lewis always took great care of the Fishing Pier property, even clearing away blackberry bushes that should have been a maintenance crew’s job.

“Ed is one of the nicest guys in the world, and he’s always working at something at the park,” Hansen said. “When he’s assigned a job, it’s done. It’s unbelievable that somebody is treating him this way. It’s bad enough what they did to him in his job, but he’s hunkered down and not created anyway waves. He’s not done anything to deserve this kind of treatment.”

“It’s all political, it’s all personal, and it stinks,” added Power.

Lewis said he and his wife will probably hitch up their fifth wheel and travel for a while.

GRATEFUL FOR EXPERIENCE

Brett Marlo, for her part, says she is grateful for the four years she has enjoyed at the nature preserve, but thinks the district doesn’t fully understand all the services the hosts performed.

“As soon as I’m gone, they’re going to find out,” she said. The sandspit is fragile habitat for a lot of birds and marine species, but it’s also tempting to after-hours visitors.

“I’ve definitely had to chase people away at night,” she said. “Living here, I’ve been able to quell most of that behavior, but I’m afraid it’s going to return. The patronage of the preserve has probably tripled since Covid began.”

Marlo lives in a “tiny house” of her own design with her two daughters, ages 12 and 15. She owns the house, but the park district owns the pad it sits on. She now has a little more than a month to move out, at a time when the real-estate market is overheated.

“It’s hard to find another location in these times really quickly,” she said. “It’s crazy out there.” She is hoping to find a place in Tacoma.

Marlo says she likes to look on the positive side of things, and sees an opportunity for neighbors and the district “to have a conversation about a better plan for these properties.”

“Once I’m not here, that will kind of force a situation where the district will have to decide on a way to better deal with the site in the future,” she said. She hopes neighbors will form an advocacy group.

PROMISE OF CARETAKER

Ken Higgins, who has lived on the island for 60 years and is its unofficial historian, says that when the state Department of Fish and Wildlife first built the fishing pier back in 1995, part of the agreement with the neighbors was that there would always be a resident caretaker on the site. In fact, he said, the site plan was revised to show an RV pad and hookups. When the property passed to PenMet parks in 2011, the agreement was supposed to follow, he said.

The untended park “had been a nuisance for a long time,” said Julie Higgins, speaking for her husband, who is partially deaf. “There would be these Friday night kid parties, with bonfires and drinking and so forth. We were always calling the sheriff. We were very pleased with their promise to have a person there, and we’ve had a lovely bunch of volunteers over the years.”

In the early years, volunteers were a mixed bag, she said. Some were conscientious, some not so. For a time, the Higginses kept the keys to the gate. When Lewis came six years ago, he brought stability to the park and things settled down, she said.

Powers said neighbors of the parks are particularly upset that there was no public notice, no agenda item and no discussion by the park board about the decision.

“The larger concern is that PenMet has created a solution where there wasn’t a problem,” said Powers, who has been organizing Fox Island neighbors in the hope of getting the decision reversed. “They have not asked for input at all or put any information out to the public.”

Hansen raised the issue during the public comments at a PenMet Park board meeting July 20, but the board did not take it up during their discussion period.

In the FAQ posted on the PenMet website Saturday, the district said there was no public discussion because the decision was made “administratively.”

Two emails supportive of the decision to terminate the host program were read at the meeting. Lauren Stephens, who said she lives near Sehmel Homestead Park, criticized the hosts for “living for free on beautiful waterfront property at the expense of tax-payers. Any argued benefit could not possibly account for the years of free rent and utilities that have been exploited by these ‘caretakers’.”

Billy Sehmel, a Fox Island resident and former park board candidate, was also supportive of the district.

“In my opinion, the host program probably isn’t needed if it isn’t bringing in any income revenue to the park district from the hosts or if it costs tax payers any money,” he wrote.

But another Fox Island residents, Jackie Bean, said the decision sounded like false economy.

“It might sound good as a cost savings, but for security and safety it is a huge sacrifice,” she wrote for herself and her husband, Roy. “Are you installing cameras for activity that will happen as soon as the hosts are no longer present? Vehicles will park outside the park after hours and attract people to gather with no supervision of their littering and noise.”

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story misspelled the name of a Fox Island resident. She is Peggy Power, not Powers. This story was originally published July 23, 2021 3:40 PM.

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