

Kern Valley Sun

March 21, 2007

Group tries to rally community support



Camp 9 is now being operated by the Forest Service after the Community Recreation Commonwealth's temporary use permit for 2007 was not renewed.

Cathy Perfect-Kern Valley Sun

A diverse group of more than 100 Valley residents came together March 17 at the Senior Center in Lake Isabella to hear about the "Community Crossroads Project," organized by the Community Recreation Commonwealth (CRC). The CRC is headed by Richard Dancing and George Randall, both Kernville residents, and Albert Beutick, owner of H & R Block in Lake Isabella.

The meeting featured a PowerPoint slide presentation, complete with one slide showing a yellow "Kill Camp 9" arrow pointing to the chronology of CRC's tumultuous interactions with the Forest Service.

With CRC's call to rally the community coming more than a week earlier, the Community Crossroads meeting came just three days after the Forest Service informed CRC their temporary use permit to operate the Camp 9 facilities would not be renewed for 2007. The non-profit group's permit expired Dec. 31.

In a pronouncement on the morning of March 14, Kathy Johnson, USFS Permit Manager, said she was "not sure if they (CRC) had a permit," and stated she could not comment on the status of CRC's 2007 application use permit because it was "under review, which is a normal process."

According to Dancing, earlier that same morning, he confronted two men, who were driving a Forest Service vehicle with a flatbed trailer attached, as they loaded two of Camp 9's portable toilets onto the trailer. After some discussion and Dancing taking photographs, the two men replaced the portable toilets and left the campground.

When hearing of Dancing's encounter with the toilet removal crew, Johnson said, "I would assume that's (Recreation Manager) Cheryl Bauer's 'rec techs' (recreation technicians)...because not all 24 toilets are used, some are probably being put away or maybe they are cleaning them. It's not a very busy time of year."

When advised that the annual Fishing Derby, the largest fishing derby in the state, was just two weeks away, Johnson said, "Oh, really? I don't keep track of those things."

Meanwhile, Randall, Dancing, and Beutick waited to hear the fate of the application they had submitted to Johnson on Feb. 16.

There seemed to be little doubt, according to CRC representatives, that the use permit would not be re-issued. The groups has been at loggerheads with local Forest Service personnel for more than two years.

At issue, according to Dancing, is the Forest Service having "all the authority, but no accountability."

The chronology of events unfolds like "As the World Turns," replete with signs of reoccurring breakdowns in communication and dimetrically opposed world views. According to Dancing and Randall, the CRC's troubles began when Johnson came on board in 2004.

In a July 2006, letter to then-District Ranger Dave Freeland, the CRC expressed its frustration with Forest Service personnel that Dancing characterized as "less than qualified to perform an assigned task." Dancing said his letter went unanswered.

According to Dancing and Randall, since 1997, when CRC began overseeing the Camp 9 operations, the site has "functioned effectively, was immaculate at all times, collecting 99.9 percent of all possible fees due the government."

To date, Forest Service personnel have not responded to Kern Valley Sun's inquiries about the validity of the CRC claims. However, on March 15, Geri Adams, Supervisory Information Assistant for the Kern River Ranger District, issued a press release stating, "For the 2007 season, Camp 9 will be operated by the Forest Service, said Recreation Manager Cheryl Bauer. The camping facilities will operate on a first-come, first-serve basis for a fee of \$8.00 per night for an individual site; \$50 per night for a group site; \$5.00 for the RV dump station and/or a day use fee of \$5.00. An additional fee of \$5 will be charged for a second vehicle.

"In the past, Camp 9 was operated by Community Campground Company on an annual basis. A new permit was not issued for the 2007 season due to compliance issues regarding fees, the site's water system, and the RV dump station."

At the March 17 meeting Dancing described the Forest Service's take over of Camp 9 and the nationwide Recreation Site Facility Master Planning (RSFMP) as "an opportunity to take back control of our community."

The RSFMP outlines the Sequoia National Forest's proposed five-year plan that, among other things, calls for converting 52 developed campground sites to "concentrated use areas (CUAs), eliminating (decommissioning) additional sites , while leaving 54 developed sites as they are now.

As described in the report, converting developed campground sites to CUAs would result in visitors "...mainly see(ing) a change in services and facilities; no water, tables, or grills would be provided. In many cases, restrooms would remain. Many people camp in self-contained units, and they may not miss the reduced services and facilities. However, others do not have self-contained units, and they will miss those facilities and services on which they have come to rely. Flush toilets will be removed, and SSTs (portable toilets) will be installed in their place. Showers will be removed. While some people may not be happy with the changes, they will allow us to operate these areas to standard."

The propasal goes on to state, "The conversion to CUAs will have less impact to users than closing or decommissioning the sites. For sites at Lake Isabella, in particular, the reduction of facilities may be unpopular with some members of the public and elected officials. However, elimination of fees would be very popular."

The CRC group will meet again at the Senior Center March 24 at 9 a.m.