

Report on February 25, 2010, trip to Santa Barbara to investigate New Beginnings RV Parking Program

By David Ewing and Stewart Oscars

Venice participants: Councilmember Bill Rosendahl; CD11 staff: Jim Horwitz, Mike Bonin, Arturo Pina, Nancy Franco; LAPD Officers Theresa Skinner and Peggy Thusing; Venice residents David Ewing and Stewart Oscars.

We'll write chronologically about what we heard and saw. We realize as we are writing this it is the result of a free flowing conversation, so please bear with that.

NEW BEGINNINGS COUNSELING CENTER

We started at New Beginnings (NB), the program administrator, located at 324 E. Carillo, SB. New Beginnings is a social services provider organized around a counseling center. We spoke with Gary Linker, Director of NB. (Nancy Kapp is the Parking Program Director, and she is the last person we interviewed).

Gary presented us each a packet of information describing their program. The packet included: a description of New Beginnings work in the community; the RV Parking Program in detail including 14 rules for lot users, a program application form, a vehicle permit, a list of the 21 lots in use with population breakdown, client waiver relieving NB of liability, a license agreement form for lot owners, and an outreach flyer.

Highlights of our conversation with Gary:

- There are 21 lots in use with 105 vehicles using them. The lot sizes are: 3 have 1, 1 has 2, 1 has 3, 10 have 5, 2 have 6, 1 has 9, 1 has 11, 1 has 15, and 1 is for summer use only. The hours of the lots are approximately 7pm-7am.
- The latest count of live-in vehicles in the area puts the number at 354. Summers tend to be higher, winters lower.
- Lots used are city, county, churches, nonprofits, and businesses.
- Some lots are 10 to 12 miles outside the city. Dwellers tend to stay near their respective lots.
- There are several lots in the downtown area.
- There is one lot near the beach, and that lot parks women and families.
- Some of the lots have porta toilets, some have no facilities.
- Two lots are for RVs only. The others allow a mix of vehicles. There's a 21 ft length limit in City lots.
- Some lots are for women and children only, some for women only, or women and families.
- When an applicant applies, NB uses this opportunity to evaluate the person(s) for counseling, aid. Programs are offered but not required. Good behavior is the only required action of the dwellers. Case managers come to the lots twice a week to check compliance, build relationships with clients, and offer services. There are 2 counselors on staff working with the population. Clients are referred to NB and other agencies for social services.

- Every month the client must renew her/his permit, and the permit can be renewed perpetually. Permit requirements are a valid CA driver's license, CA vehicle registration, and insurance. People being placed on a business lot are checked for felony convictions.
- The goal is to relocate all people to permanent housing.
- On a yearly basis 25 vehicle dwellers are being placed in permanent housing and another 30 are being placed in jobs.
- A breakdown of the program's components usage is:
 - 1) placement on lot.....100%.
 - 2) use of case management by dwellers.....90%.
 - 3) loans from NB.....20%. These are loans to repair the vehicles, license the vehicle, obtain a driver's license, smog the vehicle, secure insurance.
 - 4) life skills training.....5%.
 - 5) counseling.....10-15%.
- The program is built on trust. NB does not coerce clients. They make sure there are continuing contacts which are used to build trust. There is an understanding that people have alcohol, addiction, and mental health problems. People may not be interested in services offered in the beginning, but the relationship can lead to referrals in the future.
- At each lot, one of the lot dwellers is chosen by Nancy Kapp, the case manager, to be a lot captain, with attendant responsibilities. A bit of character building.
- NB does an orientation every 6 months with SBPD for educational purposes.
- NB is responsible for insuring the lots at a total cost of \$4200/year +/- . The insurance covers not only the lots but the program clientele with liability insurance.
- The estimate of employed residents is 50%, most of whom have dropped down in terms of previous employment.
- If a dweller breaks the rules, the person is dropped from the program after one warning.
- It is reported that citizen complaints are virtually nil regarding this program. When the program was first started complaints based on the newness of the program and lack of trust led to some complaints. The larger number of campers on some lots has not created more problems.
- Non-program complaints regarding nuisance Rv type vehicles have remained constant over the years. Vehicle dwellers who are resistant to the program have been known to create problems with trash, running generators, and a myriad of disruptions as they move around Santa Barbara.
- City and county ordinances had to be adjusted to make this work.
- A private waste hauler (Marborg) works with the program to empty the vehicle holding tanks at no charge. This dumping may be at a central site in the city. Gary feels this is an important facet of the program.
- The lots cannot be within 50 feet of residences, and residents appear to have little power in siting decisions.

CITY HALL

Next, we walked to City Hall and met with Mayor Helene Schneider; Council Members Grant House and Das Williams; City Attorney Steve Wiley; SBPD Lt. Donald McCaffrey.

- All spoke in favor of the program and consider it a success.
- Councilmember Williams was himself a vehicle dweller at one time.
- The genesis of the program: SB had a growing population of campers on the streets with some of the same problems as evidenced in Venice. The city's initial response was to try to ban campers entirely; homeless advocates responded with a suit. A settlement negotiation resulted in the parking program creation along with increasing the city's ability to regulate on street camper parking.
- The program is low cost to the city: \$125,000/year. Sources of funding: SB funds roughly half with \$43,000 coming from general funds and \$15,000 coming from Community Development Block Grants (Federal funds). The balance is privately funded with \$15,000 from donations and \$52,000 from foundations.
- The program is not perfect and does not solve all problems, but it helps SB have more control over the RV population and regulate parking; and it provides real services and opportunities for those who want them.
- The streets in the waterfront area downtown (between the 101 freeway and the beach) are strictly no RV parking.
- Since SB has a supply of parking spots for RVs/live-in vehicles, they can enforce parking restrictions that regulate times and places when vehicles can park on city streets. This allows vehicle dwellers security and residents security. Enforcement of laws is necessary.
- Program lots are self-policed by the lot captain, then the program director, and police as necessary. Clients develop a stake in keeping things in order.
- An ordinance against vehicle dwelling is enforced only upon complaint. Where greater enforcement is needed, SB has an ordinance that allows the Public Works Director on advice of the Chief of Police to post signs that ban or restrict RV parking in proximity to various specific use areas.
- Decentralization and not allowing massing of RVs in areas reduces problems in the city.
- It is illegal to live in one's vehicle on the city streets in SB. It is possible to have lots and still have this protection for the residents. The key is ordinance writing. The SB CA, Steve Wiley, is willing to work with our CA regarding ordinance drafting.
- Wiley also said there is very little liability exposure for the city.
- RVs need to be self-contained: the holding tank must work properly.
- RVs are not considered transitional housing. They are not adequate housing.
- 5 or more parking tickets issued to a vehicle on 5 separate days allow impoundment of said vehicle (a state law).

PARKING LOTS

Thirdly, we toured a few parking lots. We also picked up SBPD Lt. James Pfleging at this point.

- The size/scale of the lots in SB seemed larger than the lots available in West Los Angeles and in particular Venice.
- Lots that park 5 RVs in SB are probably equal in size to Whole Foods lot, for the most part.
- The lots have bush/tree growth or walls that screen the parking spots from resident/street view, and the actual parking spots are not near housing.
- Some lots had porta toilets and some had no facilities. Where there are no porta toilets, parkers are told to use restaurants, gas stations, or what have you.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Lastly, we visited Nancy Kapp, NB Parking Program Director, at Salvation Army where she has her office. This building is located in a commercial area downtown. We were also joined at the very end by NB outreach worker Roslyn Scheuerman .

- Nancy was previously homeless.
- She runs the program on the ground. She finds sites for the lots. She enforces the rules and deals with any disputes between participants.
- She reiterated what we had heard during the day.
- The population of lot users is diverse. 25% come from outside SB; 75% have ties to SB. They can be new or chronic vehicle dwellers. They function at many different levels.
- It's all about trust. They make sure there are continuing contacts, and they use them to build trust. They don't coerce clients. They develop relationships, provide services and keep rules.
- Tents, lawn chairs, and so forth are prohibited outside the vehicle.
- If people are not getting along at a lot, they are moved to a different lot.
- She will not choose a site if the neighbors are not in favor of the operation. A lot will only work out if the nearby residents are in accord with it. If a neighbor does not want the lot, Nancy said she will find somewhere that it will work.
- There is an understanding that some people have alcohol, addiction and mental health problems. They may not be interested in services, but some of them eventually surprise you. If you build a relationship, sometimes 6 months later, they'll ask for a referral for a program or service.
- She spoke with great conviction and compassion for the people involved in the program and the fact that it can be a long-term process to get people into permanent housing.
- Nancy and Roslyn are in process of writing a program manual.