

Homeless campers removed from Joe Rodota Trail in Santa Rosa

A Sonoma County spokesperson said cleanups happen twice a week. This week's effort was expedited because of a growing number of tents on the Santa Rosa trail.



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Sonoma County sheriff's deputies talk to a person stopped along the Joe Rodota Trail in Santa Rosa, Tuesday, May 7, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)



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Dozens of homeless people were cleared starting Monday from the Joe Rodota Trail, marking the latest disbandment of campers from the public path and sparking yet more criticism from advocates who contend people have nowhere to go and need solutions to keep them off the street.

The cleanup was necessary after the number of trail occupants ballooned over the weekend to about 50, Sonoma County spokesperson Matt Brown said.

"No camping" signs are posted on the paved path that leads between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol.

Sonoma County Regional Park rangers and Sonoma County sheriff's deputies started arriving at 8 a.m. Monday giving people notice they had to leave.

"Due to the high number of tents along the trail this week, they decided to do the cleanup on Monday and return for the next two days to ensure that everyone relocates as required," Brown said in an email.

He said people were given until Tuesday afternoon to leave the trail. They were offered services, including beds at Santa Rosa's Sam Jones Hall, the region's largest homeless shelter. It was unclear how many campers accepted that offer.

Contractors with FS Global, a disaster relief company, removed and stored unattended property.

By 7:30 p.m. Monday, the trail was clear except for an empty tent.

About 12 to 15 people congregated near the Joe Rodota trailhead at Stony Point Road Monday night. Others congregated in the parking lot of Stony Point Plaza, which borders the trail.

“At least there are benches here,” one of them said as he stood outside Big 5 sporting goods store. He identified himself only as Steven.

Homeless advocates rushed to the site Monday evening, including Wendell Coleman, a member of the Lived Experience Advisory and Planning Board. It’s made up of people who experienced homelessness and advise Sonoma County’s regional homelessness coalition.

Noting the “very distraught” looks on their faces, Coleman said homeless people need opportunities for work and education to get them off the street and end the cycle of Joe Rodota cleanups.

“Try to get down to the core of an individual’s issues,” he said.

Victoria Yanez, a local attorney and homeless advocate, said she spoke to about 25 of those removed Monday night and none of them had anywhere to go.

“There was no plan and they were afraid of being arrested,” Yanez said Tuesday afternoon.

On Monday, one man who declined to provide his name quipped he would have called DEMA, “but you know how that turned out.”

DEMA, an embattled for-profit homeless provider, operated two sites in Santa Rosa until its local collapse last week in the wake of a county decision to sever ties with the company.

A 2023 Press Democrat investigation into its operations led to a county financial inquiry that was unable to account for millions of dollars DEMA billed the county.

Employees were laid off or resigned last week, and by Thursday the county’s Health Services agency was left managing the two sites for homeless people.

The two sites included one on Administration Drive on the county government campus in Santa Rosa. It opened it a year ago after Sonoma County leaders declared a shelter crisis in large part due to the number of people living on Joe Rodota Trail.

The Administration Drive site was hailed by officials as a key pandemic-era tool for keeping people off Joe Rodota Trail.

Nonetheless, homeless people continued to set up camp along the trail, as they have for years.

Last October, a federal judge ruled homeless people had to leave a portion of the trail on Caltrans property near Dutton Road.

Brown said everyone was offered alternative housing assistance during Monday’s cleanup. Yanez said no one was offered housing right away.

She said “they’re resigned to not knowing what to do.”

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