



FUELING THE FIRE

If a burning church in the middle of a the night in Garberville doesn't wake you up, I don't know what will. Could any event be a more symbolic than a steeple in flames? No I'm not speaking of the end times, but potentially, IF government were to learn from their mistakes, the end of traumatic times for the most vulnerable of Humboldt community.

A fire raged in Garberville early morning June 16th, flames engulfed the Presbyterian churches **Fellowship Hall** and food bank- Only 5 days after beloved, unhoused community member **Brian Tree** was beaten nearly to death in the same location.

District supervisor **Estelle Fennel** describes her impression of the RV inhabitants at the 6/20 County Supervisors regular meeting "were not talking about people down on their luck, where talking about people scalping at the law, and security of the community." But many could tell her "getting rid of the few bad apples" theory was rotten.

District 3 Supervisor **Mike Wilson** stated " This is a Street I grew up on, that being said I completely empathize with people who have to deal with some of these issues, as far as people who are housed and are not, I'm interested to see what staff will come back with on this, we have to be clear not to cross the line of criminalizing homelessness. This is what I am most concerned about."

No one wants to find themselves parked outside a church in the middle of a tiny forest town in their RV- to be constantly harassed, having to move an RV in Garberville/Redway where they are set on fire weekly, where cars breaking down daily on our incredibly damaged mountain roads, where there are virtually no available mechanics or affordable towing and RVs are generally not welcomed.

Greenfuse spoke with the only man in the RV when it caught fire. Anonymous (for his protection), is a refugee from Russia "on political asylum," who has lived in Humboldt for over 5 years. Anonymous was sleeping in the RV when the fire began so he is "not sure how it happened," he stated, but he did recall the exploding propane tanks and flames which woke him around 3:30am. "The propane tanks were just for cooking." Though Anonymous admitted to using candles for light inside the RV to see, he felt it was not the caused the fire. He suspected it was intentionally caused by foul play from people who "wanted them gone."

Anonymous explained before the fire he and his partner got in a dispute about where to park the RV that night. His partner wanted to stay close to the food for people building to acquire food hopefully the following day. He woke up to the fire and doesn't even recall how he escaped to RV. He also explained that since the fire he reports being attacked because people have judged him of being guilty without proof. This includes Deputies who told him to leave town on multiple occasions. The hospital staff was not sympathetic or helpful either according to the victim of the fire.

Anonymous and his partner broke up a week later so he is houseless now after he lost everything he owned in the fire, he didn't even have a pair of shoes when we spoke. I have not seen him since July 6th.

The Ashes Are On Your Hands

Anonymous said it was either an accident or caused by vigilantes, and the evidence leans towards this conclusion, but I am more interested in this fire being entirely avoidable and how subsequent proposed "solutions" by Estelle Fennel are akin to dumping fuel on the fire she claims to care so much about. The ONLY cause to park in town is the same cause for the fire- there are no accessible (affordable w/ public transportation) campgrounds in Redway/Garberville and the basic survival services are at this location, as the community has been begging Fennel to address for countless Board of supervisors meetings.

After over 4 weeks of investigating there is still no conclusive police report or government resolution in sight. Many echoed suspecting the fire was caused by vigilantes as the other fires have been.

John Hardin states at the supervisors meeting:

"I think this is a really sleazy way to take advantage of a terrible tragedy. We don't know this wasn't another act of vigilante violence against poor and homeless people... we have a terrible culture of vigilante violence that needs

to be addressed. If the Board of Supervisors did something after Rob Micado got set on fire, or Richard Wallace got beat in the town square or gone after the arsonists who set dozens of campers on fire, if you would have take those things seriously, we might have prevented this tragedy all together. Were talking about aesthetic crime, not public safety ...At the same time we do not have enough housing and there are a lot of people using this fire as an excuse to punish poor people further, after you've already criminalizing people asking for help (panhandling statutes), people for trying to sleep, criminalize poor people who have no money, while your not bothering to go after real criminals. If your going to put up a ban on parking you need to have a place where people can park. We need to make a space for honest working people in southern Humboldt because they cant afford the housing, because it is priced for drug dealers. We need to treat people in their campers as they are decent people, treat them like human beings."

The Gates Of?

Unfortunately Estelle Fennel is *still* in total denial of the shelter crisis, which in a sense enables camping outside of town to have a less harsh penalty because it recognizes the reality of the basic need to survive in such desperate conditions. While Fennel organizes government resources around band-aids and business as usual, in essence she is only fueling the fire. Fennel states, "What were trying to look at is a tool for law enforcement, to make sure people are not in situations like this. We did an overnight ban on parking an on Sprovel Creek and that was very effective." So effective it brought RVs to the center of town to nearly burn it down? One longtime houseless resident explained to **Greenfuse** "the no parking signs proposed would not solve anything but make the problem much worse, after all people used to camp on the freeway overpass away from neighbors close by and structures, where it was a bit safer, before they were pushed into town right where this happened." How is more parking ban or signs and no alternatives going to accomplish anything?

When we look at "solutions" proposed by government and the business community over time it's clear how well they worked out. For example, John Perricone A local neighbor on the scene that night who witnessed the fire explained to KMUD news ,

"Outside the food bank door there are wrought iron gates that keep the homeless from sleeping there...That proved to be the undoing for saving the food bank. They couldn't get the gates off, they tried with bolt cutters, their axes...They were very well put together and installed...They made the command decision that they can't save that building, so they went for surrounding buildings, the church."

When we lock people out, we lock everyone out.

Amy Littlefield explained at the Supervisors regular meeting, "... I see this as potentially collective punishment...it could have been an accident, or vigilante violence or arson given the history of both of these things in southern Humboldt." She explained if it wasn't an accident prosecute the individual, not the group, and added,

"I really don't understand how people in an RV are any more of a risk of fire than people in apartments or a house. We don't collectively punish housed people because one breaks a law or causes an accident. And I would like to remind you that most of the people living in their vehicles have nowhere else to go, and I have heard no proposals for alternative places to go so its incredibly cruel to just say move on... instead of working on a ban I think you should be working on safe alternatives and I really don't understand why that doesn't occur to people."

Humboldt County dumps fuel on fires and stands around wondering why the problem meets them at their front gates. Provide people a place to camp, stop criminalizing the most disenfranchised in the community, stop chasing people around and starving them of services so they become so desperate and have nowhere to hide but the middle of town. Offer services instead of worst-case scenarios such as this. It could be so simple.

There are volunteers, non-profits and activists who have pounded down Humboldt County government doors for years to resolve these very issues, only to have those same doors shut in their faces. I asked one human rights and housing activist **Debra Carey** how she felt about the fire and her experiences trying to work out alternatives for the at risk, she said,

"...every RV that burns is a possibility of the loss of human life... RV burning has been going on for years in southern Humboldt. To this day I have yet to see a law effectively change this. Clearly making laws doesn't solve problems. An ordinance to stop RVs from parking in unincorporated areas will not stop RVs from parking here. That's like believing that if you sweep homeless people around they will leave, it just doesn't work like that. There's nowhere to go. We have no available Places to park an RV in southern Humboldt, so folks park on our streets. Safe legal campgrounds could be made easily available for those that are nomadic and only passing through, and of course we could build tiny house villages for those who are here to stay. I began a non profit centered around this over 3 years ago, I have submitted several proposals to the city of eureka and for measure Z for safe parking for cars and RVs, for tiny house villages, nomadic campgrounds, and never has the Board of Supervisors considered an effective solution to remedy this

So if a group has enough investment capital, loads of volunteers, plans for parking, sustainable tiny house villages, and the will to make this a reality, self-managing etc. what is stopping us?

Cofounder of one such group Affordable Homeless Housing Alternatives (AHHA) **Nezzie Wade**, Ex- volunteer Human Right's Commissioner, who resigned based on these very issues exacerbated by Fennel's policies, states to **Greenfuse**,

"The systematic dehumanization and criminalization of those experiencing homelessness, characterizing them as a large indistinct group of criminals,

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