

## Transient troubles plague Fort Collins neighborhood park

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Residents of a quiet Fort Collins neighborhood near a park and elementary school are upset about what they claim is an increase in transient troubles that threaten the safety of the area.

The increasingly unsafe conditions have become a concern to Laurel Elementary School staff, bordering businesses and the surrounding neighborhood and serve as a microcosm of citywide concerns about the transient population.

Eastside Park, 100 Locust St., has seen numerous sexual assaults, including one recently that allegedly involved a child, aggravated assaults and aggressive transients, some of whom neighbors said urinated and defecated on their lawns, were drunk on their property and were seen having sex in the park.

Resident Lisa Cunningham said the problems have worsened.

“My son, when he was in second grade, was commuting by himself to Laurel (Elementary School),” Cunningham said. “Just in the past couple years, I haven’t had that comfort level with my daughter because there has been an increase in transients in that park. At the same time, I’m of the belief that it’s a public park, and it’s for everybody. It’s a complicated issue.”

The frustration came to a head in June when nearby residents were invited to a neighborhood meeting at the school to discuss the safety of the park. Poudre School District officials, city officials and police were also in attendance, along with more than 50 neighbors.

At the meeting, Laurel Principal Tommi Cox introduced the idea of a fence the district began discussing more than a year ago. The proposed fence would follow the property line of the school, and its gates would be locked during daytime hours to ensure a greater level of safety for children. The fence was proposed in part in response to four incidents on school property in the last year, including one in which two people were reportedly having sex in the park.

Despite acknowledging park safety concerns, residents at the meeting expressed frustrations that they were introduced late to the proposed fence conversation. Some disliked that the fence would cut through the heart of the park and across its small hills where families like to sled. It would also create a bottleneck on the north side of the park, residents said, because the path already runs along another fence.

“I’m not saying how it will look in the end,” said Pete Hall, PSD executive director of operations. “There may be a compromise fencing solution. It gets beyond the fence. The fence is a barrier. Use, awareness, patrols, neighborhood involvement — it’s a multifaceted approach.”

Many people argued the fence doesn’t address the larger issue at hand — trouble-causing transients.

“That’s our take: the safety and security of the students,” Hall said. “We heard the safety and security of the park (at the meeting). That’s where we’ll have a blending.”

UCHealth’s Family Medicine Clinic, located on the southeast edge of the park at 1025 Pennock Place, installed a security fence around its property this spring in response to safety concerns over the last year.

In the past five years, the small park tucked behind the school at Lemay Avenue and Elizabeth Street has seen two sexual assaults, four aggravated assaults, eight complaints of vagrancy and 31 liquor law violations, according to Fort Collins Police Services.

In 2013, Raymond Aaron Brown, 32, was arrested for [allegedly pinning down a stranger in the park and sexually assaulting her](#).

Fort Collins Police Sergeant Adam Ruehlen, who leads the Neighborhood Enforcement Team, said his team has stepped up its presence in the park since the community meeting. Before that, it had an increased presence in the park. Now, an officer visits the park nearly every day. He said though this problem is not unique to Eastside, no other park in the city currently gets as much attention from his team.

“The only time that we can really do something is when somebody is committing a crime or an act that gives us the authority to cite them and move them along out of the park,” Ruehlen said.

He suggested the importance of a community presence in the park. That is a catch-22 for residents. Their presence would make it safer, but they don’t feel comfortable being there.

“It would help if us parents would actually interact in that park,” Cunningham said. “People just walk by and avoid eye contact.”

The park is small, hilly and lacking in parking, so it’s not particularly well-suited to the programming that makes larger parks more active and safer, such as the various sporting events that often fill other neighborhood parks. No teams have reserved its space this year, said city Director of Parks Mike Calhoun.

Another community meeting is scheduled at Laurel at 5:30 p.m. on July 25.