

BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN

Rural neighborhood fielding a cluster of complaints

By Steven Mayer

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Bert Bockover, his wife, April, and grandson Elijah Bockover on their property at Old West Ranch near Tehachapi. At least nine residents of the neighborhood have been hit with legal notices from Kern County Compliance ordering expensive improvements to their property.

The rural Old West Ranch neighborhood in the hills southeast of Tehachapi has long been known for its independent, off-the-grid attitude — and for the devastating fires that have charred the local landscape in recent years.

Now there's another type of conflagration burning in Old West Ranch, a sometimes fiery dispute between those who live in legally permitted homes on the ranch and those who eke out an existence in non-permitted RVs, travel trailers and other structures that do not meet county standards.

Nine families or individuals in the neighborhood have been hit this summer with legal notices from Kern County Code Compliance, with orders to correct multiple violations of the Kern County Ordinance Code — or face the consequences.

For ranch residents Robert and Donna Moran, the county's enforcement of the violations is welcome, but to their frustration, years overdue.

But disabled musician and stage technician Bert Bockover and his wife, April, believe the compliance notice they received in mid-August has the potential to leave them homeless and destitute.

And maybe even dead.

"If we're a nuisance, how come we're suddenly a nuisance after 12 years?" said April, 59, as she sat in an ancient travel trailer she uses for cooking and quiet time. Above her, hanging on the wall, is the couple's wedding photo, shot decades ago in healthier, and possibly happier times.

Bert, 62, has roots in Bakersfield, and enjoyed a long career performing music onstage and even longer making good money working backstage on big shows and small. The couple were living in a turn-of-the-century hotel in Sonoma County when Bert's knee was turned sideways while working for the X Games in San Francisco.

That injury and subsequent heart problems leading to open-heart surgery, combined with financial setbacks, dramatically changed the couple's lives.

They have owned their 5-acre parcel near Tehachapi for some 20 years, but they never expected they would have to live there under such primitive conditions.

"We literally landed here in a tent," Bert recalled. "But we're surviving."

Now, forced to subsist on about \$1,400 per month in SSI assistance, they say they have been content, if not exactly comfortable.

There's no plumbing, no natural gas, and what electricity they use is generated by a modest solar array and a propane-powered refrigerator.

They pay a monthly service for their plastic, portable outhouse. And they have a 2,500-gallon water tank donated by Grammy-based MusiCares, a nonprofit that provides assistance for music people in times of need.

"For this to happen to us for no reason that we can see," Bert said, "we just don't get it."

After losing almost everything, the "order to abate" from county Code Compliance seemed like a slap in the face.

And yet, as the process has moved forward, the Bockovers can't stop talking about how the people with code enforcement have done everything they can within the law to assist the Bockovers in navigating this latest challenge.

"There's no reason to be mad at the inspector lady who had to come out here," Bert said. "It's not her fault. She's just doing her job – and it's probably a pretty hard job."

A HISTORY OF PROBLEMS

Robert and Donna Moran say they have nothing personal against the Bockovers. But nine years ago, when they purchased property on the ranch, they say they had to do things by the book.

"When we moved out here, there was a lien for cleanup," recalled Donna Moran, the current president of the Old West Property Owners Association. "We had to satisfy that lien before we could do anything."

The Morans paid taxes to support local schools and fire protection. They paid fees to support maintenance of the roads on the ranch, which are private and not maintained by the county. And they paid the fees for permits to legally build on and develop their property.

It's not fair, it's not a level playing field, they say, that others on the ranch are allowed to live there without doing their part as citizens and neighbors.

"To me, it's intolerable," Robert Moran said of the junk cars, the dilapidated trailers, the RVs, the sheds — and even squatters living on land they do not own.

"What does it do to property values?"

The biggest problem, Donna said, is not the physical footprint of non-permitted structures or unsightly equipment or debris. It's the people the rural blight invites.

"Druggies," she said. Squatters, meth users, thieves.

Hunters even prowl the private roads, Donna said, shooting at deer from their vehicles.

The Morans do not place the Bockovers in any of those nefarious categories. And they say they are not without sympathy for their plight.

"We understand not everyone has the finances to pay the fees," Donna said. "But if they can't pay the fees, maybe this is a lifestyle they can't afford."

ENFORCEMENT

The county's code enforcement operates exclusively on complaint-generated cases, said Code Compliance Division Supervisor Al Rojas. First a letter goes out to the residents alleging that a violation exists on property for which they are the owner or responsible party.

If the party does not respond or the violation is not corrected, the division inspects the property and provides the resident with a 30-day notice to "abate" the violations.

The nine cases currently active in the mountain neighborhood were generated by five separate reporting parties, Rojas said.

The Bockovers had expressed concerns that all the complaints were coming from one or two individuals, possibly someone hoping to run owners off the land so parcels could be purchased for pennies on the dollar.

But the variety of callers appears to invalidate those concerns.

“We get that accusation all the time,” Rojas said. “And we try to be sensitive to the possibility.”

Since the 30-day notice, the Bockovers say they have gotten serious about making measurable progress to abate the violations. Two travel trailers have been broken apart and hauled off, and three cars have been removed.

Meanwhile, the progress they’ve made, and the consistent communication with code compliance, has earned them a deadline extension.

“I think I’m doing pretty good for a gimp,” Bert said with a chuckle.

A SOLUTION?

In order to come into compliance, the Bockovers must do one of two things. Remove everything from the land and sell, an option they say would leave them homeless and eventually penniless. And with their health issues, they would be dangerously stressed.

The other option, which they cannot afford without help, is to establish a permitted structure on the property, drill working water well and set up a sewage system.

That seemed utterly impossible — until the couple reached out to Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit housing and community development organization based in Visalia.

Andrea Barnier, Self-Help’s manager of housing rehabilitation, confirmed the organization is currently assessing the Bockovers’ eligibility for assistance. And if they are, in fact, deemed eligible, help could be on the way for a new manufactured home and financing for the drilling of a water well.

Much work remains to be done, Barnier said, but she and her colleagues are hopeful that meaningful assistance could be forthcoming for the struggling couple.

“We’re really hoping this is going to be a success story for this family,” said Sonia Sanchez, Self-Help’s Communications and Outreach specialist.

For the Bockovers, it could mean everything.