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Park troubles plague residents

By Tom Lochner

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Bob Van Bibber remembers the Montalvin Park of his childhood.

"We spent our summers there, just layin' around. We played softball and baseball. We could go down there anytime.

"Our families would go there on Sundays. We'd have Easter egg hunts there. It was a safe place."

The idyllic picture goes back several decades. Van Bibber, who is in his late 50s, moved to Montalvin Manor, an unincorporated neighborhood of about 3,000 residents north of Richmond's Hilltop area, when he was 8.

It is a dream of lost innocence recalled amid the detritus and ruin of a decayed and ignored haunt of gangs and drugs.

On a recent sunny afternoon, Van Bibber, a reporter and a photographer were the only people in the park. Gang graffiti covered the play structure and picnic tables and marred the wood fences along its borders.

Van Bibber said he stopped taking his granddaughter there a few weeks ago after he found four syringes in the play area.

A gap in a fence along the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad tracks showed the route many Montalvin children take to the nearby MonTaraBay community center and, across the Union Pacific Railroad tracks, to San Pablo Bay.

Refuse and debris, including what appeared to be a freshly dumped truckload of appliances, furniture and rags spilled out along the road at the park's western edge.

"This is where they set the car on fire," Van Bibber said, pointing to a blackened spot where someone torched a stolen car several weeks earlier.

A neighborhood resident joined the conversation.

"Someone stole a motorcycle," said longtime resident Arnetha Puckett. "It lay there for three weeks; gas was leaking from it."

Dumping—anything from chemical containers and household garbage to stolen vehicles—is a perennial complaint of residents here as in other unincorporated areas—along with a perception that Contra Costa County is doing little to fight it.

The hardships of Montalvin Manor offer a lesson about how public services are funded in the unincorporated areas. Montalvin is lumped together with two adjacent unincorporated areas—Bayview Park and Tara Hills—into County Service Area M-17.

"It is a difficult situation," said Brian Balbas, the county's assistant public works director for engineering services. "We have very limited funding to do the maintenance in M-17."

All over the park, thieves have stripped wiring from lightposts, possibly to sell the copper to scrap dealers. At night, the darkened park becomes a haunt for drug dealers who hide among the untrimmed trees. Strangers congregate near the fences of residents whose homes abut the park.

"These guys hang out there; they have a complete party right outside your house," Puckett said. "Fifteen cars. Throwing beer cans into your yard. The kind of music that shakes your windows."

A few feet into the park, a rust-covered trail of residue of unknown origin led from an electrical well to a storm drain at the foot of Lettia Road. Water rises almost to street level in the drain and in another on the other side of Lettia.

The drains are breeding grounds for mosquitoes, as is standing water on the lawn at the base of the park, said resident John Bieth, a contractor.

Drainage has long been a problem in the area, residents say.

"My house flooded twice," Puckett said. "Ninety-seven or '98, it was really bad, we had to leave for three weeks.

"Every year when it starts raining, it's going to flood," she said." If you get two hours of rain, it's going to flood the house.

"Public works said the other day, 'We'll look into it," Van Bibber said. "Now they say it's a money issue"

"They was blaming it on the railroad," said Puckett.

Storm water from the drain goes into a pipe under the railroad tracks and into the Bay.

"Everybody was passing the buck," Puckett said.

"You know what the problem is? This is Montalvin," Van Bibber said. "If this was Blackhawk or some other place, it would get done."

Area M-17 generates \$153,000 a year in property taxes allocated for maintenance.

"It's a balancing act," the county's Balbas said.

Numerous jurisdictions complicate the drainage problem, said another county engineer. Two railroads, a steel plant and a section of the city of Richmond lie between Montalvin and the Bay, said Greg Connaughton, assistant chief engineer of the Contra Costa Flood Control District.

He said the railroads periodically send crews to check the culverts under their tracks. Vegetation between the two sets of tracks also affects drainage. The county has talked to Richmond to see if anything can be done in the city's jurisdiction, he said.

Balbas said the county is preparing cost estimates for tree trimming, drain repairs and building a wall near the railroad tracks and will submit them next week to county Supervisor John Gioia, whose District 1 covers Montalvin.

Gioia said he wants to use redevelopment money to pay for additional sheriff's office patrols and for improvements and maintenance.

Van Bibber, Bieth and fellow resident Antonio Medrano praise Gioia and his aide, Luz Gomez, for their attention to the area, which the Board of Supervisors shifted from District 2 to District 1 in 2001.

The three are on an advisory board for the three-year-old Montalvin Manor Redevelopment Project. All three want to remove a barricade at the foot of Lettia Road, which once connected to Denise Drive along the edge of the park. The road was closed off around 1990 as a crime-prevention measure.

"We want to reopen that road so the sheriff can drive through," Medrano said, echoing Van Bibber and Bieth.

The three agree with Gioia that the park is key to the revitalization of Montalvin Manor.

"I want the park back the way it used to be," Van Bibber said.