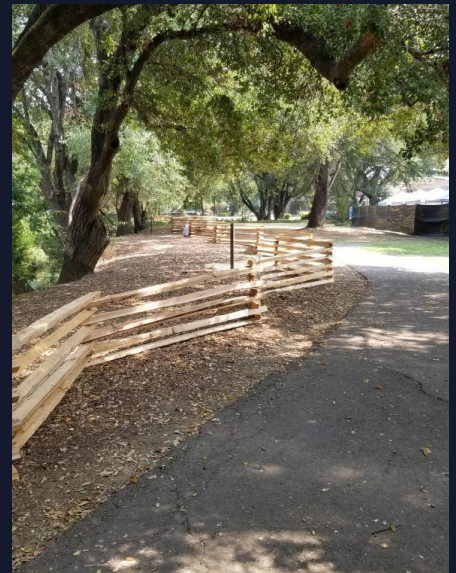




# LEE GERNER PARK

A MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF OF POLICE



**NOVATO POLICE DEPARTMENT**

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## **Dear Novato Community,**

In response to several online postings, regarding the treatment of individuals living in a homeless encampment at Lee Gerner Park, we felt it would be important to provide some information about a community policing project that was initiated earlier this year. The misleading postings have inferred that homeless individuals were “kicked out” of the park, as well as the restrooms and wash stations removed amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are not familiar with Lee Gerner Park, it is a park that runs along the creek to the rear of the Novato Library and the Star Restaurant near the crossing of Novato Boulevard and Seventh Street. The park is a mix of county property, city property and private property. Additionally, the Novato Farmer’s Market is held weekly in the parking lot adjacent to Lee Gerner Park and it is surrounded by many businesses. A walking path and a bridge connects the north and south sides of the park.

Over the past year, Lee Gerner Park has become a source of complaints from community and business owners due to a large homeless encampment that formed over time. The encampment contained a large row of tents along the North side of the walking path. In addition to the tents, a large dog run had been installed on the lawn as well as a volleyball net and a large ping pong table. The area was littered with trash, plants and trees were damaged, and the creek under the Seventh Street bridge had become a makeshift toilet for those living in the park. Many of our community members expressed their complaints as they use the park with their families for recreation, exercise, visiting the library and attending the weekly Farmer’s Market. After observing the problematic conditions this camp was causing to the environment, cleaning the park became a high priority. We partnered with the City of Novato’s Public Works Department to bring back the inviting community space that once existed at Lee Gerner Park.

In March of this year, we collaborated with the Marin County Health and Human Services Department to develop an outreach strategy for those residing in Lee Gerner Park. The mission of the project was to help find housing, provide outreach and offer services to those experiencing homelessness. This was a very important project for our department as concerns related to this encampment were heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our Novato Response Team (NRT) was tasked with meeting with those living in the park to determine what their needs were and how we could assist, either by placement in permanent or temporary housing during this pandemic. We initially determined there were approximately nine people living in seven tents within the park. The Marin County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) installed portable restrooms and hand washing stations in the front of the library, in accordance with CDC’s guidelines for COVID-19. This is required when ten or more people are residing together in a homeless encampment.

In coordination with the Marin County Emergency Operations Center, Marin Health & Human Services and the CARE Team, the Novato Response Team was able to develop individualized strategies to find temporary housing or alternative locations for eight of the nine occupants. Each of these strategies were in voluntary cooperation with the occupants. None of the individuals were forced out or “evicted”. In fact, many of the occupants identified their own alternative housing or locations. Together, we provided each of the occupants with significant resources and time to make their transition successful.

Roughly 4 months later in July, the population of homeless individuals sleeping at Lee Gerner Park was down to one. Even though significant resources have been offered to the homeless, unfortunately not everyone is eager to accept help. Once the prior occupants left the park, the Novato Police Department met with City of Novato Public Works Department to conduct an initial park restoration. This included hiring an arborist to assess damage to the heritage oak trees, creek bank and riparian life along the creek. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the California Water Resource Control Board were also consulted about a habitat restoration area. Several thousand pounds of garbage was removed from the park and a temporary fence was added to secure the area until a permanent fence could be installed to protect the creek area.

On Friday, August 20, 2020, the Novato Response Team, the City of Novato Public Works Department, the Rotary Club of Novato Sunrise and other volunteers from the community completed this project together to help revamp the park and create a barrier to protect the habitat. This was one of the first steps in rebuilding the safe and inviting park space for the community. Unfortunately, shortly after the park restoration and the installation of the new fence, an independent homeless advocate engaged over ten individuals, some from out of town, to move back into the park returning it to a homeless encampment that fell under the Covid-19 CDC guidelines.

Throughout this project, we have worked hard to balance the interests of the community with our compassion and empathy for those experiencing homelessness. We have engaged and listened to our community partners to learn about the concerns within our community regarding the crime and safety at this park.

At our department, we have continued to develop community policing projects that help our residents to feel safe and enhance the quality of life for the residents of Novato. We are proud that we have been able to connect several individuals to either permanent or temporary housing and assist them with beginning a new life. We are incredibly proud of the community members who volunteered their time to this project and are especially thankful to the members of our Novato Response Team, the Marin Health and Human Services Department, along with the CARE Team, and the Novato Rotary Sunrise who helped make this park improvement project a reality. This is another example of the police and the community working together to create a safer and more beautiful Novato. We will continue to look for housing solutions for unsheltered individuals within Novato, while maintaining the quality of life that the Novato community has a right to expect.

Sincerely,



**Matthew McCaffrey**  
Chief of Police

More Information Regarding Homelessness in Marin:

[Marin County Homeless County and Survey Report 2019](#)

Whole Person Care Marin:

[www.marinhhs.org/whole-person-care](http://www.marinhhs.org/whole-person-care)

Care Team Marin:

[www.marinhhs.org/care-team](http://www.marinhhs.org/care-team)

Housing First:

[housingfirst.marinhhs.org/](http://housingfirst.marinhhs.org/)