

Health Dept. goes after owner, resident slob at Coronado Hotel

Boeddeker neighbor, 70, leads fight to stop trashing park



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

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Boeddeker Park supporters showed pictures of Coronado Hotel trash at the Nov. 9 Health Department hearing at 101 Grove. From left: Dan Stein, Betty Treymor, Robert Lehman, Jose Vega, Dan O'Connor, Sister Karen Kieb and Jan Rasmussen.

DAN STEIN has compiled an inch-thick binder full of photos, reports, correspondence and data on his least favorite SRO, a seedy spot within spitting distance of the well-kept building where he lives at Ellis and Taylor. The binder's first page darkly announces:

The Coronado Hotel Permanently Filthy?

The answer has not been encouraging. The Health Department has a 4-inch-thick file on the Coronado that dates to August 2000. The trash flung out of its windows onto adjacent properties has become an alarming health and safety issue. A Coronado-generated trash fire Sept. 17, 2003, on the roof next door at 369 Ellis – ignited by a cigarette butt tossed out a window – hinted at what could be at stake.

Finally, on Nov. 9, the city took action. A Health Department hearing officer slapped the Coronado's owners with orders: erect a giant screen within 30 days to keep trash from being thrown off hotel property; relocate resident suspects; and conduct twice-a-day, owner-supervised cleanups in Boeddeker Park.

"It (trash tossing) is an ongoing problem in a few SROs in the city," said Dr. Johnson Ojo, principal health inspector. But the chronic fouling of Boeddeker makes the case one of the worst among SRO hotels in years.

Stein, 70, conducted a 14-month cleanup campaign to protect a piece of Boeddeker Park that was continually soiled by residents of the Coronado. He took his complaints to the hotel, the police, DPW, Rec and Park, Public Health, the city attorney and the mayor, only to wind up depressed and mired in apparent inevitability.

"I've given up," Stein said in his room at Presentation Senior Community just a month ago. "I don't know what else to do. It's worse now than it ever was, and there are more

and crack pipes.

"There's garbage over there now," said Rob McDaniels, Boeddeker's senior Rec and Park director, standing 40 feet from the area, talking with his boss, Pat Wiley, on Oct. 26. Sure enough, a quick inventory turned up a variety of debris: food, excrement, paper containers and, eight feet up, hanging in a park tree, a filthy pair of gray men's underwear.

"It has been going on at least five years," Wiley added, "and before the police station was built. I remember Capt. (Susan) Manheimer was trying to deal with it."

"(The hotel) should start getting billed for (the cleanup)," McDaniels suggested. "When people get touched in the pocketbook, it wakes things up."

"I'm in the back and well aware of the problem," said Coronado Hotel resident Dan Williams, whose basement room has a window facing Boeddeker. "I've been awakened at night by all this stuff crashing down: sofas, TVs, love seats. You think someone's trying to break in. I can't say how much goes into the park but I don't doubt that it does. And it's been going on for years, maybe since the park's been here."

"Ninety-five percent of the people here are on SSI or General Assistance," Williams said. "And we have some hard-core cases that don't belong here. There are people with substance abuse and mental problems. They're low-functioning people."

Williams, as an employed man with 18 years at the park, is unique among the transitory residents of the 72-room, 1910 hotel. Williams, a security guard, is the tenant representative. It's his job to monitor hotel conditions and bring abuses to the attention of the authorities. So he has brought petitions before the Rent Board and successfully complained to city building inspectors to get action, he says.

"A Chinese family owned the hotel before and they maintained things a heck of a lot better," Williams said. "Andy Patel bought it in October of 1998 or 1999 and things went downhill. He just wanted to collect rent. He's a slumlord and slow to address basic maintenance problems. I had a leaky faucet that needed a washer and it took four months to get it fixed. He only pays attention when he's hit in the pocket."

Assessor's office records show that as of 1999, the hotel has been owned by the Coronado Hotel LLC, although the lawyer for Cindy and Andy Patel confirms they are owners in this limited liability corporation. The land is worth \$651,659, its improvements \$882,112.

Stein first became aware of the dumping problem in October 2003. That's when he and Presentation Senior Community manager Jose Vega and Vega's assistant, Abelle Cochico, volunteered to be the first Parkscan team for Boeddeker Park and quickly became its backbone.

Palma said. ■

—TOM CARTER

needles than ever before."

Since October 2003, Stein and others have been trying to set the manager and residents of the 373 Ellis St. hotel straight. The five-story SRO faces Ellis, but its 25-foot-wide back-side squats next to the park. The hotel's southern exposure overlooks the 7-foot-high iron fence that encloses a grassy plot on a ledge next to the park's sandy play area. This children's space has been victimized by a hail of airborne filth for years, maybe since the park opened in 1978.

The hotel's south side has 12 windows out of which residents wing a disgusting array of fouled baby diapers, soiled clothing, half-eaten food, trash, used condoms, syringes

The team monthly examines every square inch of the park, taking digital pictures, evaluating conditions, writing summaries. The computerized report, always waving a few red flags, is then made available to the public through the parkscans.org Web site, and e-mailed from Stein's computer to Rec and Park and the Department of Public Works. Often, Stein will follow up with phone calls. Occasionally, as was the case with three dead pigeons early this year, DPW responds immediately to remove a health hazard. But the authorities appear to have consistently let the Coronado Hotel problem slip through the cracks, while Stein has continued to beat it like a dead horse.

Earlier this year, Stein got environmental control Officer Mari Anderson to come to the park and make an assessment. She confirmed it was a mess behind the hotel and vowed to take action. But, Stein said, nothing came of it. He called the Health Department and talked often to Inspector Eric Mar. But then, Stein said, Mar stopped returning his calls.

Stein and Vega are faithful Friends of Boeddeker Park. At monthly meetings, Stein gave his Parkscan report, always tearing into the Coronado Hotel issue. In April, he and Vega wrote to the hotel management, complaining on behalf of the Friends group. The manager called Stein and promised action – cleanups and monitoring any misbehaving residents. Nothing happened.

Incensed by "the lying," Stein and Vega wrote a follow-up letter five weeks later and included Parkscan pictures "showing the area in the park underneath your windows again littered with garbage, debris and filth." The letter cited two civil codes the hotel was violating – "Littering" and "Disorderly Conduct" – and threatened to go to the city attorney unless action was taken by the end of May. Stein sent copies to six city officials and departments including the area's environmental protection officer, the Health Department, the city attorney and the mayor.

Meanwhile, much in the park was improving with a police crackdown on drug dealers that sent them out of the park and a platoon of volunteers determined to make the park pretty, safe and inviting. But under the Coronado windows it was still an ampie.

Here is a Boeddeker Parkscan entry from July 31: "One week ago this area was thoroughly cleaned and syringes and garbage removed. Today we again find exposed syringes and accumulated garbage sent via airmail from the Coronado Hotel. This is an imminent health and safety hazard, especially now that we are encouraging children to use the park."

Stein contacted Deputy City Attorney Nellie Palma in May with complaints and again in July. Palma confirmed that the hotel has been in hot water on a variety of issues for a long time. She said she was in touch with the hotel's attorney who was "responsive," a description that puzzled Stein because nothing was changing. And then Palma was no longer returning his calls either, Stein said.

Stein got his hopes up when Mayor Newsom visited Boeddeker Park Aug. 4. He got His Honor's ear for two minutes, just enough time to make his case for the growing health hazard in the midst of a flowering park.

"I wonder what would happen if they (the hotel management) got a call from the mayor," Stein quoted the mayor. The next day, Stein followed up on the conversation with a letter to Newsom, reiterating the festering park problem and, in a postscript, inviting him to visit 4-year-old Presentation Senior Community next to the park.

"I got a call a week or two later from one of his aides," Stein said, emitting a hollow laugh. "He said the mayor would have to politely decline the invitation to visit Presentation. Nothing was said about the Coronado Hotel, of course."

The same month, Tenderloin police Capt. Kathryn Brown told The Extra that she had suggested Stein gather the Coronado refuse in a big bag, take a picture of the contents, present it to the hotel manager and ask what they intend to do about the problem. Retelling the story, Stein said Capt. Brown facetiously suggested he dump the bag's contents on the hotel desk. He would agree, he said, only if she would accompany him. "She declined," Stein said.

Stein and Vega also have been part of 3-month-old volunteer Presentation cleanup crews. Vega, in fact, has led the first three "Greening and Cleaning" crews of up to 20 senior citizens that sometimes are joined by youngsters referred from Friends of Boeddeker Park. Fortified with a pastry and coffee, the seniors tackle the park's eyesores and do a bit of planting one Wednesday a month under the direction of Boeddeker's Rec and Park gardener Thomas Wang. The seniors' familiarity with the Coronado's refuse may be repugnant but it only stiffens the challenge.

"Every time has been bad in that area," says senior citizen Regine Walker. She had just freshened up from her toilet on Oct. 27, a day when it was hot at 8:30 a.m. and the crew collected 27 bags of debris. She paused in Presentation's

main floor library to describe her experience working near the Coronado fence.

"Plastic bags of garbage, broken glass, liquor bottles, cans, bones and half-eaten food – you can't be surprised at anything you find there," she added. "And it's right next to the children's play area and basketball court. Today, it was stacked so high you could see it from the walkway."

Since July, Wang, the gardeners he supervises, and the cleanup volunteers have found 19 needles in Boeddeker, at least six he attributes to the area behind the Coronado. "I have buckets of them that I keep for the Department of Health," Wang said in an interview. "People think of gardening as innocuous, but it sure is risky. I tell the volunteers no hand-soil contact."

Wang says a gardener got stuck with a Boeddeker needle July 7, and Wang's supervisor a year before that. Neither suffered a serious consequence, both testing negative for hepatitis B and other diseases.

The most recent Parkscan, Oct. 27, was as bad as ever. "It was pretty much the same," Vega said. "We expected to see less but it was more garbage than before. All kinds of things from chicken bones to condoms. And there were things hanging from the trees."

Meanwhile, the DPW had turned environmental control officer Mari Anderson's findings over to the Health Department and they landed on Inspector Mar's desk. For Mar, who had received a number of calls from Stein, it was old turf that sent him into the department file on the hotel that is four inches thick and dates back to August 2000. That's when Rec and Park brought it to the department's attention that their janitors were reluctant to pick up needles near those Coronado windows. So a meeting was called.

"Andy Patel or one of his managers showed up and we brokered a deal," Mar said. "The hotel would send one of its janitors over daily to clean up the area. Everyone exchanged phone numbers. It opened up communication."

No one can pinpoint when that deal went sour. "The level of compliance has been questionable," Mar confessed. "That hotel has been problematic over the years."

Yet it escaped serious Health Department action.

Complaints resumed this year and Mar joined an interdepartmental Code Enforcement Task Force inspection of the hotel April 20. Officers and officials from the city attorney's office, Tenderloin Police Station, Fire Bureau, Building Inspection and Health Department traipsed down the dingy hallways that day, taking pictures and speaking to residents.

"It's quite a big deal to get that many departments together at one time," said Palma.

Mar brought flyers warning that throwing trash out the windows could warrant a \$500 fine. One is up in the lobby now, according to Williams. And Mar said he asked every tenant with a window on the south side if they tossed things out the window.

"One said yes," Mar said. "I explained what the consequences could be and the problems it caused. He said he wouldn't do it anymore. But, with the retrofitting now, I think they are clearing some people out. But I think it is only one or two doing it."

The team told Patel to take care of the outstanding maintenance complaints, rampant in 2003 as well. In June, he requested a three-week extension. By July 8, only 15% had been corrected, as reported on the Building Inspection Web site. The housing inspector on the case, Alex Fong, referred the noncompliance to a director's hearing, which has been delayed indefinitely because of the hotel's seismic retrofitting.

Mar reinspected on July 26. He found the trash situation "improved," ostensibly because the hotel was sending its janitor outside to clean that section of the park every day at 1 p.m. But Mar's later visits showed the problem was far from solved. He took pictures there in late October "and it was bad," he said. He put the Coronado on the agenda of the Nov. 9 Health Department hearing at 101 Grove St. If the hotel failed to meet its trash abatement tests at this level, it would advance to a director's hearing. The last stop, where painful fines and lawsuits emanate, is the city attorney's office.

The hotel's lawyer, Richard Stratton, who says he has represented the Patel family off and on for several years, knew nothing of the hearing. He told The Extra he is more an intermediary between the Patels and the city attorney's office.

As far as he knew, he said, the hotel's janitor was going into the park daily at 1 p.m. to pick up hotel trash, and had been since Mar said so in his July 26 report.

"The owners would like to see Boeddeker cleaned up, and law and order restored," Stratton said. "It's a nice park in a tough part of town. People can't abdicate the park. They've got to take it back. And everyone has to pitch in to pick up litter."

But Stratton indicated the "problem might take care of

itself." Only one floor now is occupied because of retrofitting, he said, and the owner told him the one known trash-tosser had moved out.

The Extra asked McDaniels on Nov. 3 if he had ever seen a hotel manager or janitor cleaning up the area in question.

"No," he said. "Not ever?"

"Nope, not ever."

Stein was surprised and greatly relieved to receive news of the hearing.

"It has taken a long time – I first talked to Eric Mar a year ago and I haven't heard from him for nine months – but this is great," he said. "I'll miss my doctor's appointment, but I'll be there with as many people as I can round up. The hotel's been getting away with this for years."

At the hearing, Stein showed up with seven supporters carrying signs displaying blowups of Parkscan pictures showing the debris. Andy Patel and a supporter were there, as was Mar and his boss, Principal Inspector Ojo.

"It's an ongoing problem," Mar told hearing officer Ken Sato. "Sometimes I have seen a lot of needles there."

Stein called it an "intractable problem" that has "gotten worse."

Thomas Wang said "every day" trash is in that spot. He carried to the lectern his box of 19 needles. Sato asked him if there was any improvement over last year. Wang said "no" and confirmed that the trash did indeed come from the hotel.

Sato asked to see the pictures. He asked Patel if he had seen the pictures. Patel said no and stepped up to look at them.

"We've been trying our best," Patel explained. "We've been sending our janitor out twice a day to pick up. It happens overnight. It's two to four people who are doing it."

Patel said he gave tenants flyers about trash violations and has them sign statements saying they will keep things clean. Eight units face the park, he said, and due to retrofitting just four are occupied now. One tenant is moving out soon and another is being evicted, he said. In response to Sato's suggestion, Patel said he could move the other two elsewhere in the hotel.

Sato, expressing relief that no children had been injured by needles, asked Ojo for his recommendations. They were: the owner erect a several-story-high, small-mesh screen directly behind the hotel within 30 days; the hotel janitor clean up the park area in question twice daily and be accompanied by the owner; and, relocate the rear tenants. As a matter of good business, following an idea of Rasmussen's, Ojo suggested a hotel representative attend Friends of Boeddeker Park meetings.

That afternoon, Mar, Ojo and Patel met at the hotel. They examined the back area and determined how the screen would be fixed. They walked through the hotel and looked into rooms being renovated. Patel said he has wanted to cooperate in every way and have the hotel look "nice." Ojo said fine, but if there is no compliance, it could lead to fines and prosecution.

It seemed the end of a chapter but not the book. ■

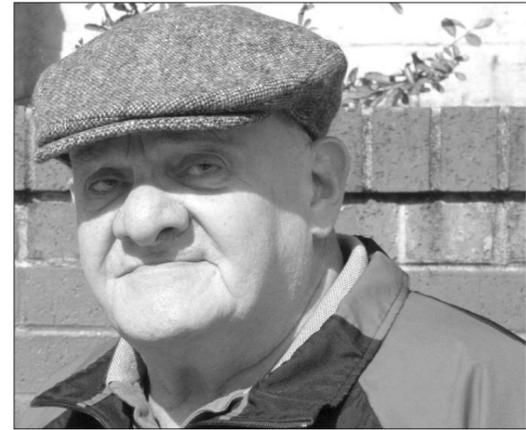
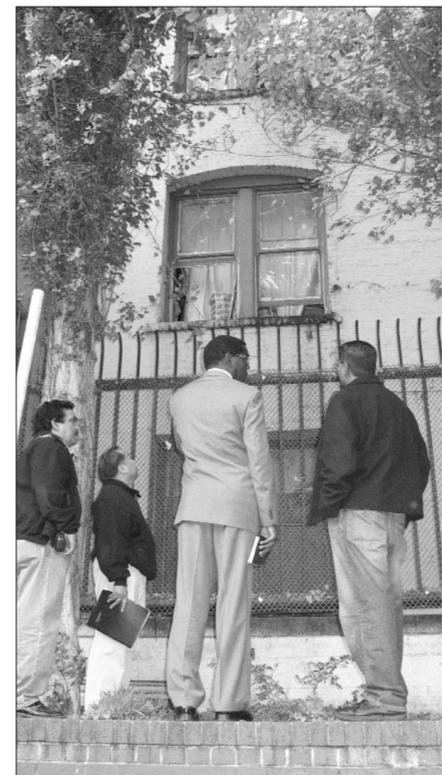


PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Dan Stein, whose dogged campaign to halt the trashing of Boeddeker Park has paid off.

The Health Department's Dr. Johnson Ojo (center) is flanked by health Inspector Eric Mar (left) and Coronado Hotel owner Andy Patel (right) as they discuss erecting a screen to block hotel debris. At far left is a hotel employee.

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO



Drugs long a part of needle yarn

THE Coronado Hotel's needle problem extends out the front door as well as out the back windows.

For months the hotel has been under surveillance by plainclothes police and monitored by the city attorney's office, which has received "many" complaints about drug activity there. But because only one floor is now occupied due to retrofitting that will last another two months, that problem, according to the owner's lawyer, is alleviated, at least temporarily.

The hotel at 373 Ellis has been a player in the drug pattern The Extra revealed in the park toilet story in September. A three-month narcotics arrest pattern in that area, requested by The Extra, showed that three-fourths of 104 arrests were in the 300 and 400 blocks of Ellis, many bunched at the Jones intersection. Three-fourths of the arrests

were for crack cocaine.

"It is an egregious situation," said Nellie Palma, deputy city attorney. "We've gotten complaints about drug dealing in the (Coronado) hallways, doorway and out in front. Police arrive and ring the bell and have to wait a long time to be let in. But other people who ring get right in. It was a drug stronghold earlier this year."

An April 27 letter to the hotel from the city attorney included the police reports about drug activity in and around the hotel. The letter also said the city attorney had evidence to support a lawsuit, and if the hotel didn't abate this "public nuisance" it could be fined \$25,000.

"They (the owners) were pretty responsive," Palma said. ■