

LOMPOC RECORD

Making it official

Lompoc High football star Toa Taua signs with Nevada. **SPORTS, B1**



Sheet-pan suppers

Meals for one baking tray **B5**



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2018 | lompocrecord.com | An edition of the Santa Maria Times



LEN WOOD PHOTOS, STAFF

A homeless camp in the Santa Ynez riverbed, east of Lompoc, is seen Thursday afternoon. An estimated 60 to 100 people call the riverbed home.

‘Trying to survive’

Homeless riverbed residents react to plans for police sweep

WILLIS JACOBSON
wjacobson@leececentralcoastnews.com

A native of Oklahoma, Travis W. said he had been living life on the road as a vagrant before he was dropped off by an acquaintance in the Lompoc area about two months ago.

Travis, who asked that his last name not be revealed, has lived in and around the Santa Ynez riverbed on the outskirts of Lompoc ever since.

“It’s been the toughest couple months of my life; just the survival factor,” the 19-year-old said Thursday evening before trekking to back to his encampment for the night. “Just living day-to-day life is a lot harder than people realize.”

His current way of life, along with the lifestyles of the estimated 60 to 100 other people who call the riverbed home, could be on the verge of a significant shift.

Just days before Travis shared his plight with Lee Central Coast News, Lompoc Police Chief Pat Walsh received approval from the Lompoc City Council to begin developing a plan to rid the riverbed of all people and debris. In advocating for the sweep, Walsh argued that the nearly 3-mile



A homeless camp in the Santa Ynez riverbed, east of Lompoc, is part of a settlement that has developed between the Robinson Bridge east of the city and the Highway 1 bridge to the city’s north.

stretch of riverbed between the Robinson Bridge east of the city and the Highway 1 bridge to the city’s north is rife with violent crime, drug use, theft and untold safety hazards.

Travis, as well as some of the other residents of the riverbed, responded to the threat of a sweep with a simple question of their own: Where do they expect us to go?

“I wish we had somewhere better to go or something better to do, but all we have is trying to survive out here,” he said.

Community issue

In his presentation to the council, Walsh said it will take an entire community effort to

handle the situation correctly. He acknowledged, though, that it won’t be an easy process, particularly for those Lompoc residents who are already unhappy with the issues created by homelessness in the city.

“People might be complaining now, but if we do this, they’re gonna be complaining more,” Walsh said, referring to the sweep, which would likely drive many homeless people into the city.

“And they’re gonna expect us, the police, to solve all those problems,” he added. “We will address what we can, but people who own property will have to address what they can as property owners. That’s not a cop-out; it’s just

we’ve got to work together.”

Freddie, a friend of Travis’ who also declined to publicize his last name, said Thursday that he spends a lot of his time in the riverbed. Unlike Travis, the 25-year-old Freddie grew up in the Lompoc Valley and said he technically lives with his parents in Vandenberg Village.

Still, he said he frequents the riverbed because that’s where all of his friends are. He noted that his situation is not unique and said he was against a sweep of the riverbed not only because it would displace people who could be out of options but also because it would break up strong — though perhaps different than those in “normal” society — bonds that have developed among the riverbed occupants.

“There’s a community down here, you know,” he said. “Everyone helps each other out. Yeah, we steal from each other and are a bunch of f***in’ tweakers and s**t; but the fact is we always help each other out down here. ... There are people that come down here to help, but there’s more people that come down here to f*** s*** up.”

Travis agreed with that assessment and suggested that those causing the trouble should be the targets of any law enforcement efforts.

Please see **RIVERBED**, Page A2

Lompoc offers support for riverbed sweep

Chief recommends removal of people, debris from area

WILLIS JACOBSON
wjacobson@leececentralcoastnews.com

Noting that crime in the Santa Ynez riverbed just outside Lompoc has “escalated dramatically” and that drug use and sales have recently “exploded,” Lompoc Police Chief Pat Walsh recommended steps Tuesday night that would ultimately lead to the removal of all people and debris from the riverbed area.

Walsh addressed the Lompoc City Council on Tuesday night to advocate for a move toward clearing out the riverbed, which is home to many of the area’s

homeless residents. Walsh received support from the majority of the council following his half-hour presentation and said that he plans to bring back more specific plans in the future to begin a sweep that would empty the area.

“I don’t think people should be living in the riverbed; I don’t think it’s as safe as we think it is,” Walsh told the council. “If we’re honest with ourselves, I think we have to admit, as a community, that we’ve forgotten these individuals.”

Walsh cited numbers from the most recent homeless count that suggested that there are a little more than 200 homeless people in Lompoc. Of those, he estimated that anywhere from 60 to 100 live in the riverbed.

Please see **SUPPORT**, Page A2



WILLIS JACOBSON, STAFF

Lompoc Police Chief Pat Walsh addresses the Lompoc City Council on Tuesday night to advocate for a plan to remove homeless people and debris from the Santa Ynez Riverbed that runs along the city’s border.

ABOUT TOWN

Registration open for teen leadership conference

The city of Lompoc is accepting registrations for the fifth annual TOTAL (Teaching Our Teens As Leaders) Conference, which is scheduled for 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday at the Dick DeWees Community and Senior Center, 1120 W. Ocean Ave.

The conference is put on by the Lompoc Youth Commission. The theme for this year’s event is “Hollywood: Shoot for the Stars.” The conference is open to all middle and high school students. The keynote speakers and breakout sessions are designed to teach, motivate, empower and energize teens. Registrations will be accepted at the door between 8 and 8:45 a.m. Monday. The cost to register is \$10 per person.

To register, contact the Lompoc Recreation Division at 875-8100, stop by the Anderson Recreation Center at 125 W. Walnut Ave. or visit <https://apm.activecommunities.com/lompocrecreation>.

LCA show to feature Brass Roots Trio

The Brass Roots Trio, whose music is a colorful mix of styles and sounds, will be the featured performers during a Lompoc Concert Association program scheduled for Saturday at the First United Methodist Church of Lompoc, 925 North F St.

Doors for the concert will open at 6:45 p.m., with the show set to start at 7:30. Tickets, which will be available at the door, are \$25 for adults and \$5 for students. The Brass Roots Trio is made up of musicians Travis Heath (trumpet and flugelhorn), Douglas Lundeen (French horn and vocals) and Rosetta Senkus Bacon (piano).

For more information on the show and/or the Lompoc Concert Association, which is now in its 70th season, call 588-5971 or visit www.lompocconcert.org.

Volunteers needed for community project

The Lompoc Beautification and Appearance Commission is seeking volunteers to assist with a work project planned for Saturday at D Street and North Avenue.

The work, which will begin at 8 a.m. and run until it is complete, will involve spreading mulch, planting drought-tolerant plants and helping to enhance the community. Lunch will be provided. Volunteers are encouraged to bring tools, such as wheelbarrows, shovels, pitchforks and rakes.

To RSVP as a volunteer, call 875-8034.

Fundraiser to benefit Fallen Warriors Memorial

The Lompoc Valley Fallen Warriors Memorial Committee will host a fundraiser from 5 to 8 p.m. Feb. 20 at Tom’s Burgers, 115 E. College Ave.

Money raised will go toward a memorial the group plans to construct at Beattie Park to recognize and remember all military service members from Lompoc who died in combat.

For more on the memorial, or the fundraiser, call 588-4498 or email lompocvalleyfallenwarriors@gmail.com.

Please see **TOWN**, Page A2

ONLINE TODAY

■ See video of football star Toa Taua’s college signing at lompocrecord.com

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Send mail to: P.O. Box 400, Santa Maria, CA 93456

President & Publisher: Cynthia Schur
Managing Editor: Marga Cooley
Assistant Managing Editor: Len Wood
News Editor: Emily Slater
Sports Editor: Joe Bailey
Staff Writer: Willis Jacobson

925-2691, publisher@leececentralcoastnews.com
739-2143, mcooley@leececentralcoastnews.com
739-2215, lwood@leececentralcoastnews.com
739-2217, eslater@leececentralcoastnews.com
739-2239, jbailey@leececentralcoastnews.com
249-8565, wjacobson@leececentralcoastnews.com

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Customer Service 1-877-286-1686 or 739-2207

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FIRE REPORTED IN SANTA YNEZ RIVERBED

A fire flared up in the Santa Ynez riverbed near River Park in Lompoc on Friday evening. Emergency personnel responded just after 6:30 p.m. It wasn't immediately clear what ignited the blaze.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Town

From A1

Registration open for YMCA 'Livestrong' program

The Lompoc Family YMCA is accepting registrations for its "Livestrong at the YMCA" program, a national partnership between the YMCA and the Livestrong Foundation to help adult cancer survivors achieve health goals.

The 12-week program is free to cancer survivors. The next session in Lompoc will be Feb. 26 to May 17. The program aims to help cancer survivors move beyond the disease in mind, body and spirit. Trained wellness coaches will work with each participant as they transition from treatment to regaining their physical and emotional strength.

For more information on the program, including how to register, contact YMCA Regional Wellness Director Nicki Marmelzat at 686-2037 or nicki.marmelzat@ciymca.org.

LOTTERY

To see Saturday's Lottery numbers, including those for Mega Millions, Powerball and Superlotto, go to lompoprecord.com.

Riverbed

From A1

"If they went through and did a sweep where they got rid of the people they were actually looking for, then so be it," he said. "But, don't mess with people who don't have a choice to be down here."

Underlying issues

Both Travis and Freddie acknowledge that they struggle with mental health and addiction issues.

Travis said he has bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He said he self-medicates, usually with marijuana.

Freddie didn't divulge the exact nature of his mental health problems but said his temperament usually comes down "to how I'm dealing with it at the time."

He said he also self-medicates, though his drug of choice is heroin.

"I try to do that as much as possible, because it helps," he said.

The rise of methamphetamine use and sales in the riverbed were among the issues raised by Walsh in his address to the City Council. He also pointed to a series of recent deaths, including two that were believed to be overdoses and a Nov. 19 ho-



LEN WOOD, STAFF

The Robinson bridge on Highway 246, on the southeast side of Lompoc, is covered with graffiti near numerous homeless camps.

micide after which the suspected killer was shot and killed by police.

Freddie said the dangers are all too real for him.

He said he witnessed that November shooting and spent at least a moment thinking he might be among the victims that day.

"I was the first one to run to the tent after it happened," he said. "I got there so quick that the guy who actually shot (the victim) pointed the gun in my face as I was running up toward the tent. He was like 10 feet away. That was pretty trau-

matizing."

Joining forces

In Walsh's presentation to the council, he called on community agencies — including those that deal with physical health, mental health, addiction and homelessness — to come together.

Mark Ashamalla, a mental health professional who has done regular outreach with the residents of the riverbed, estimated that a vast majority of the riverbed dwellers are native to the Lompoc area and have family and familiar faces nearby.

He lamented the fact — as have others who have done outreach — that agencies often don't work together as well as they could and are frequently "drowned out" with bureaucratic red tape. He said he was hopeful that the people in the riverbed would get the help they need if and when they are displaced.

Travis said he was hoping to move back to Oklahoma as soon as he could. In the meantime, he spends his mornings collecting firewood and kindling so that he can have warmth at night —

another hazard mentioned by Walsh — and then goes into the city to get clean water and to solicit handouts from shoppers.

On Thursday, he had a cart with several grocery items as he headed back to his campsite.

"People don't like handing out money to people out here because a lot of these people use drugs, but I'll ask them to walk in the store with me and buy the food and that's helped me out a lot," he said.

Moving forward

Walsh didn't give an exact date for when he intends to present his plans for the sweep — those plans will presumably include time frames for evictions and cost estimates for removing the several tons of items from the riverbed — but he said he would begin working on it in earnest.

As those plans progress, the diverse riverbed community, which is often hidden in the shadows of Lompoc, will likely keep operating as usual — never knowing what will come next.

"Any time you stay down here, there's always so much that can happen," Freddie said.

Willis Jacobson covers the city of Lompoc for Lee Central Coast Newspapers. Follow him on Twitter @WJacobsonLR.

Support

From A1

Homelessness has long been a pressing issue in the city, but Walsh said the situation is worsening and suggested that it could get out of control if it goes ignored for much of longer.

Walsh began his presentation by showing a brief slideshow of pictures that

he said were recently taken in the riverbed. The photos showed dozens of likely stolen items, including many bicycles; massive piles of what looked to be garbage; large encampments of tents and other makeshift housing; remnants of fires that he said were especially common on cold nights; and even home-like structures built into the side of the riverbed embankment.

Walsh also brought up the Nov. 19 homicide in the riverbed in which 28-year-old Timothy Ross Culley was killed after what police allege was a dispute over a woman. The suspect in that homicide, 34-year-old Geronimo Vicente Santos, was ultimately shot and killed by Lompoc Police after a confrontation.

Noting that the riverbed often goes unpatrolled, Walsh said the scene is akin to "the wild west." Things have gotten so bad, he said, that some of the longtime riverbed residents have started calling the police in an effort to have drug addicts and thieves taken away.

Walsh said the city can expect to see waves of new homeless people coming to the Lompoc area if the city continues to ignore what is happening in the riverbed. He based this on the fact that several other cities around the state are performing riverbed sweeps, and also due to the potential number of homeless people who fled Ventura and southern Santa Barbara counties after the Thomas fire last year and the subsequent deadly mud-

slides that primarily affected Montecito last month.

"My worry is that if we do nothing and everyone else is doing something ... then our numbers (of homeless people) are gonna swell," Walsh said.

Walsh said the entire community — particularly businesses and social support agencies — would need to be involved for the sweeps to be effective.

One of the ways Walsh suggested moving forward was to have a Lompoc Police officer or unit solely dedicated to homeless issues. He acknowledged that this would cost "a bit of money," as would just simply cleaning out the riverbed, but he did not provide any cost estimates. He said he'd research the costs further and report back to the council at a future date.

While Mayor Bob Lingl and council members Victor Vega and Jenelle Osborne each offered vocal support for having the police department address the riverbed issues, some members of the community said they felt other avenues — besides forcing homeless people out of the riverbed and into the city — should be explored.

Lompoc resident Tyann Campfield said she was "disappointed" by Walsh's suggestions and instead advocated for the city to pursue allowing a tiny house community, in which homes could be constructed from items like large shipping containers.

Campfield, who identified herself as an advocate for homeless people, had made the same suggestion at past public forums, but she said that it never led to anything due to "red tape."

Shawndel Malcolm, the director Planting a Seed, the organization that led a cleanup of the riverbed late last year, also took issue with some aspects of Walsh's proposal.

Malcolm noted how support agencies often don't work in tandem, even when the same agency offers different services, which leads to people ending up back in

the riverbed even after being offered and accepting assistance. He also pointed to the high cost of living in the area and the lack of response from some agencies, some of which said are exploiting the Lompoc homeless population for grant funds that are then used in other cities.

"Instead of Lompoc being proactive, we are becoming reactive," he said. "I am more concerned with what we're asking the agencies to do."

"My concern is we have a serious fundamental issue with resources we claim to offer that need to be addressed," he added. "Our supportive services are broken. We cannot say we are offering support when we continue to hand clients a broken ladder and ask them to climb up. Homelessness is not a crime, however we're right back to criminalizing their situation."

After receiving direction from the council to pursue a complete sweep of the riverbed, Walsh said he was planning to "actively address our partners" in the community as he works to develop a plan.

In other action Tuesday night, the council voted 3-2 to allow cannabis operations in mixed use zones in the city.

The issue was brought to the council because mixed use zones include both retail and residential uses. City staff proposed banning commercial cannabis in such zones in an effort to "minimize the negative impact commercial cannabis activities may have on residential uses," according to the city's staff report.

Osborne, Vega and Dirk Starbuck voted in favor of allowing cannabis in mixed use zones — the initial motion was made by Osborne — while Lingl and Councilman Jim Mosby voted against it.

The next meeting of the Lompoc City Council is scheduled for Feb. 20.

Willis Jacobson covers the city of Lompoc for Lee Central Coast Newspapers. Follow him on Twitter @WJacobsonLR.

Puzzle solutions for page B4

T	S	K	S		A	E	R	O		T	A	B
A	L	O	E		B	O	E	R		O	V	A
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3	9	4	5	1	2	6	8	7

Difficulty Level ★★★★★

2/10

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CIPHER SOLUTION: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world." — Margaret Mead

Snow Day

at Lompoc Foursquare Church
Sunday, February 11 from 3-7pm

- Free** Sledding Hill, Snow Play Area, & Crafts for all ages
- Free** Popcorn, Hot Cocoa, Coffee
- \$1** Hot dogs, Nachos, & Tator Tots (free for active duty)

Lompoc Foursquare Church
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