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The Shoreline tent city generated no more police calls than would be expected from an apartment complex with 100 residents, said Shoreline police Capt. Carl Cole.

When the King County Jail director, Larry Mayes, asked police in Seattle, Burien, Tukwila and Shoreline about their experience with tent cities, he said, "The story is basically the same at each jurisdiction. The data doesn't indicate any increase in crime or public-safety issues or calls for service."

When campers pitched tents in the parking lot of El Centro in 2000, one angry woman blamed the tent city for a panhandler who slammed her car door. A grocery owner claimed campers were pilfering from his shelves.

But when the tent city returned last fall, said El Centro Executive Director Roberto Maestas, "I don't believe we received a single complaint."

"I think they've been great neighbors," said Allan DeSuler, whose home is across the street from the two tent cities at El Centro. "They weren't loud, they weren't drinking, they weren't drugging. I felt more secure on a summer night with them being across the street than I did some nights being out in downtown Seattle."

Violators evicted

Tent-city campers are subject to expulsion if they violate a code of conduct that prohibits drug or alcohol use, weapons or violence, abusive language, loitering and disturbing neighbors.

Two weeks ago, a camper from the tent city at Lake City Christian Church was permanently banished when he was caught stealing steaks from a grocery. Last week, a man was expelled after The Times reported his comment that he had been drinking earlier outside a convenience store.

Tent City 3 executive-committee member Jeff Roderick said campers are constantly on the lookout for wrongdoing that should be reported to the police and assign two residents to security duties 24 hours a day.

"We report anything we see," he said. "If we don't, it's going to reflect on us. If there's a kid that tries to break into the house next door, we're going to be blamed."

Two Haller Lake merchants said there was an upsurge in littering of beer cans and urinating on buildings, and one said there was a modest increase in shoplifting during a recent encampment. The tent city's litter patrol picked up the empty cans every morning.

Larry Jennings, manager of a Texaco gas station and garage, said students walking to Ingraham High School cause a much greater litter problem — and don't send out patrols to pick up the mess.

"We had a gal out here who looked like she was prostituting," Jennings said. He followed her back to the tent city and reported the incident to the church. He never saw the woman on the street again.

"It's not all of them," said a convenience-store employee about the drinking, littering and shoplifting he attributed to tent-city residents. He asked to remain anonymous. "It's probably five or 10 out of 50. We can't act like it was nothing, but it was not all that bad."

Michael Ostrogorsky, co-manager of GreenWing Gardens and Parrot Cafe in Haller Lake, said he misses the litter patrols that cleaned up the neighborhood each morning. "They picked up everybody's trash, whether it was theirs or not. I was actually sorry to see them go," Ostrogorsky said.

Camper apologizes

Times Newspaper

The tent city was a more intimate experience for Sherry Scheline, with tents brushing against her low chain-link fence.

When a camper gave beer to her dog, Jamoki, she scolded, "I thought you weren't allowed alcohol."

"He said, 'We're not — Shhh!' " She told a church worker about the incident the next day and the camper apologized.

Campers typically asked permission before approaching her dog. Scheline and her daughters gave flashlights, blankets, hot Krispy Kreme doughnuts and other food to the campers.