



Six tons of trash removed from Boardman

Special to the Record-Eagle

TRAVERSE CITY — On a chilly morning last Saturday, a swarm of about 50 volunteers, assisted by half a dozen members of Traverse City’s homeless community, fanned out to begin what surely ranks as one of the most audacious cleanup projects in the city’s history.

The target was a series of homeless encampments near and below the Goodwill Inn on Keystone Road — a hellscape of sodden sleeping bags, tents and mattresses, fetid clothing and shoes, rusted food cans, tires, broken bicycles, shopping carts, empty liquor bottles, discarded syringes and other waste too foul to list.

When the work detail was over, volunteers had bagged and filled an American Waste truck with a staggering six tons of garbage that had been accumulating for years on the property, part of which is owned by the city and part of which belongs to Garfield Township.

Afterward, the organizer of the cleanup, retired dentist Norm Fred, the indefatigable 81-yearold founder of the nonprofit Boardman River Clean Sweep, was ecstatic.

“I’ve done a lot of cleanups, but this was the biggest one-day cleanup we’ve ever done, by far, in terms of the amount of trash,” he said. “Cleaning that up was a triumph.”

Volunteers arrived from Community Quest, the Goodwill Inn, the township and the city. There were representatives from nonprofits Traverse Area Paddle Club, American Rivers, the Brook Trout Coalition and Trout Unlimited. Members of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, YouthWork and the Northwest Michigan Libertarians showed up.

Also assisting was a Grand Traverse County sheriff’s deputy, accompanied by two of the hardestworking jail inmates Fred said he had ever seen.

Because some of the sites were close to the Boardman River and down a steep embankment below the city brush dump, Fred arranged for a flotilla of canoes to transport the 55-gallon bags of garbage to the South YMCA

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Makeshift garbage barges transported 79 bags of garbage, a twin mattress and assorted bicycle parts to the South YMCA at Logan’s Landing where officials had arranged to pick it up with an American Waste truck.

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at Logan’s Landing, where city officials had arranged to pick it up with an American Waste truck. In all, he said, the makeshift garbage barges transported 79 bags of garbage, a twin mattress and assorted bicycle parts to the South Y.

“We’ve done quite a few garbage cleanups in the past, but I’ve never seen that much garbage along that length of a stretch,” marveled Tom Vitale, a park steward for the Grand Traverse Conservation District who assisted on the cleanup. “It was unbelievable. My biggest take from it was it was an awesome collaborative. . . . Kudos to Norm Fred for bringing that amount of people together.”

Volunteers worked in teams, with homeless citizens pitching in. To induce the homeless to assist with the cleanup, Fred offered them vouchers redeemable for cash — \$2 for a bag of garbage and \$4 for large items like mattresses and bikes, which most of the time had to be hauled uphill.

One young homeless man turned down the vouchers, saying that he was happy to help but didn’t need the money.

“I know how to survive,” he said. “I collect bottles and cans.”

Several volunteers said they were horrified to see so vividly the deplorable conditions in which their fellow citizens are living in a city as affluent as Traverse City. Although a few of the homeless camps are partially visible to motorists who drive on Keystone Road, most of this panorama of human misery is hidden from public view.

Derek Morton, the parks steward and code enforcement officer for Garfield Township, said he was stunned when Fred first walked him through the area in 2020. Because of the pandemic, the cleanup could not be undertaken last year. When he returned this year, Morton said, he was even more astonished.

“It was amazing to me to see how much more garbage had accumulated,” he said, adding that a group of volunteers working the week before the cleanup had picked up about 1,000 used syringes.

“I don’t think the public understands,” Morton continued. “These people are living in wooded areas where you don’t see them. We want our parks to be family-friendly and based on what we took out of there it’s not safe.”

Tom Auer, a retired physician who assisted on the cleanup, said his dream is that someone will donate a couple of picnic tables for the camps. He envisions a day when trash receptacles, which are regularly emptied, are placed among the camps. And he would like to see signage that asks the homeless residents to protect the fragile wetlands in which they are living.

“I don’t think people really realize the difficult settings that these people are living in,” he said. “I’ve been doing cleanups for 20 years and I always feel good doing them.”



A before, left, and after photo after a weekend cleanup targeted encampments near and below the Goodwill Inn on Keystone Road.

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