

POINT REYES LIGHT

Bolinas resorts to "grassroots" traffic control



David Briggs
TOURIST TRAFFIC: Around noon last Sunday, a Bolinas man armed with a traffic cone and an orange vest wheeled his rolling walker to the corner of Wharf Road and Brighton Avenue and began diverting traffic away from Wharf—unless drivers stated they were heading to Bo Gas. The town and nearby natural attractions are drawing unprecedented numbers of visitors, often leaving locals unable to find parking downtown.

By
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Bolinas locals distressed by a flood of visitors took matters into their own hands for the second week in a row last weekend, instituting what has been described as a spontaneous grassroots effort to prevent cars from entering portions of downtown.

Equipped with traffic cones and orange vests, the small contingent doggedly diverted traffic away from Wharf Road—letting some locals through, allowing visitors to stop at the gas station and at times urging other residents to join the blockade in shifts.

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Two weeks ago on Saturday, Marin County Sheriff's Office deputies dispersed locals who had "set up barricades" at the intersection of Brighton Avenue and Wharf Road and were "telling vehicles that the town is closed," according to the office's press log. While most residents are reluctant to outright endorse the efforts, many breathed sighs of relief upon finding a parking space available for grocery shopping or other downtown business.

"I have to say it was really nice to go downtown and have someone say, 'Here's parking for you,'" said Jennie Pfeiffer, a longtime resident who called the group the "Bolinās Parking Patrol" in a piece published in the Bolinas Hearsay News on Monday. "Otherwise, we absolutely do not have parking downtown for us."

With the growing popularity of its public beaches, trails and natural attractions, traffic and parking problems are increasingly plaguing Bolinas locals trying to reach homes and businesses. Those problems were particularly acute two Sundays ago, when resident Alethea Patton said she saw around 100 cars gridlocked along Mesa Road, heading for the Palomarin Trailhead.

"I've never experienced anything like that in my 25 years in Bolinas," Ms. Patton said. "They just kept coming and coming and coming. I was astounded."

Spokesmen for the seashore say the park service had to close Palomarin's parking lot on a few occasions when it filled, sending cars spilling back into town.

"Palomarin is getting an overabundance of visitation like we've never seen before," spokesman John Dell'Osso told the Light in February. "They're coming here from some search engine that sent them to 'Palomarin,' and I don't think they know what they're getting into."

And as summer approaches, many anticipate a worsening of the situation. Emery Calo Vest, who co-owns La Sirena Bo-Tique downtown, said the dead-ends on Wharf Road and Brighton Avenue are often completely packed by 9 a.m.

"People are sick of it," Ms. Calo Vest said. "I don't know what can be done, but something has to be done for the comfort of everybody—tourists and locals alike."

While locals have literally taken to the streets to lessen the traffic load, a newly reformed committee under the Bolinas Community Public Utility District has set out to revive a scrapped parking plan drafted in 2006.

Last month, the district's board of directors voted to re-form the committee—several of whose members are involved in the nascent Bolinas Community Action Network, or BoCAN—in order to simplify the plan and reapply for permits to implement it.

"We're in the very beginning stages of this," said Evie Wilhelm, a member of the committee and a founder of BoCAN. "We're ready to do whatever groundwork is needed to gather data and to breathe new life into this plan."

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The plan proposed to boost the town's 247 parking spaces by 33 additional spots in beach and commercial areas by converting some existing parallel spaces to diagonal parking spaces, and by adding five new handicap spaces.

It also proposed to institute 21 timed parking spaces limited to two hours or less from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, and 23 resident-permitted spaces limited exclusively to residents.

Though drafted a decade ago, the plan's language addresses the same problems that Bolinas faces today.

"The historic trickle of visitors to downtown, which in the past has tended to materialize primarily on sunny summer weekend days, is now an increasing daily deluge," the 10-year-old plan reads. "Residents and visitors report being unable to access the beach, unable to shop for groceries, unable to patronize the library and/or post office, and unable to attend the museum and other community events because they are literally 'parked out' of downtown."

At the time, Bolinas residents approved the plan by a 56.78 percent to 44.22 percent advisory vote, and the district applied for a coastal permit to implement the plan.

But despite support from the Sheriff's Office, Department of Public Works and Supervisor Steve Kinsey, the California Coastal Commission denied the application on grounds that regulating parking would constitute a de facto denial of public access to the coast.

This time around, however, the district feels it may have a better shot at convincing the Coastal Commission otherwise. "We think there would be evidence to show that, actually, public access is being thwarted by the current situation," said Jennifer Blackman, the district's general manager. "People try to come to the coast and they can't."

Supervisor Steve Kinsey—the Coastal Commission's current chairman—said that though he would advocate for a preferential parking plan for residents, any changes would have to balance local needs with visitor interests.

"Remember, without tourists, we'd all be going over the hill for every local business we now have here," he said. "We need an attitude of reasonable restriction rather than ruthless removal."

In the meantime, Bolinas will be left to its own devices to absorb the approaching swell of summertime visitors, and many residents have portended that the grassroots efforts of unofficial, local parking enforcers will continue in the absence of a satisfactory solution.

"It's not unusual for Bolinas to decide, if they don't get satisfaction from officials, to take matters into our own hands to make things better," Ms. Pfeiffer said.