Doug Oakley / Daily News

The homeless that call People's Park in Berkeley home have riled nearby residents by moving onto neighborhood sidewalks to sleep.

People problem at People's Park

At closing time, homeless tend to move out and sleep on nearby streets

By Doug Oakley / Daily News Staff Writer

It's become a nightly ritual. People's Park closes at 10 p.m., and UC Berkeley police arrive soon after to roust more than a dozen people who otherwise would spend the night there sleeping or socializing.

With nowhere to go, many end up streaming into the neighborhood and camping on sidewalks in front of homes. And park neighbors are getting fed up.

It's gotten worse the past two years, ever since university police with jurisdiction over the park started enforcing the rules more consistently, area residents say.

"This has come up primarily because the university is really going after people sleeping in the park," said Vincent Casalaina, president of the Willard Neighborhood Association. "The issue for a long time is that people just lived in the park. But when the university started to enforce the laws at 10 p.m., you see people exiting the park and going to find other places to sleep, and a fair number end up sleeping on the sidewalks. For some people to say I'm going to appropriate that strip of land for my house, well, that's not good."

Casalaina and association members recently met with Berkeley police and the city

manager's office about the situation. What they learned was that the city requires a resident to call police, who then must give homeless people two verbal warnings before moving them.

But all that may change when the mayor's Public Commons For Everyone Initiative returns to the city council for a final vote in November.

The initiative, mainly aimed at commercial areas, could repeal the city policy regarding complaints and warnings, allowing police citywide to directly cite or arrest people camping on the sidewalk under state law.

"If the requirement to issue two verbal warnings before enforcement is taken away, the community will see more results," Berkeley police spokeswoman Sgt. Mary Kusmiss said. "We have consistently found that many residents don't know the strict framework currently in place, and it has led to some dissatisfaction with the police department in recent years."

Kusmiss said people regularly call about people camping on the sidewalk and watch officers show up, but "they wouldn't see the kind of action they were asking for. We're mandated to give the two warnings, and we recognize it's been frustrating for some of the neighborhoods."

Irene Hegarty, director of community relations for UC Berkeley, said university police have always enforced the no-sleeping rules at People's Park, and finding housing for the homeless people who go there would be one answer to the problems raised by area neighbors.

But Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates, who sponsored the initiative that would crack down on behavior, said there already is space available in the city's homeless shelters.

"These people just don't want to be in shelters," Bates said.

Lydia Gans, who volunteers with Food Not Bombs to feed homeless people in the park, said she doesn't blame area residents for being upset about the sidewalk camping, but resents Bates' approach.

"It's easy to say these people don't want housing," Gans said. "The issue is they need more than housing. They need a full range of services. The people who don't want to go indoors have psychiatric problems. A lot are vets who have post-traumatic stress disorder. They need more than just a bed and a dormitory."

For Casalaina and members of the Willard Neighborhood Association, the meeting with city officials shed light on the difficult process of moving someone off the sidewalk in front of a home.

"Like it or dislike it, now we know the law," Casalaina said. "Nothing happens unless a neighbor complains. They do come by and look, but they won't do anything."