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Young Menlo Park couple could face fines of \$500 per day for living in driveway RV



Arlena Bain and Alex Mulholland pet their cat, Tuna, who lives with them and two other cats in their RV in Menlo Park's Belle Haven neighborhood in Menlo Park on Nov. 13. (Photo by Magali Gauthier/The Almanac.)

by Kate Bradshaw / Almanac

Arlena Bain and her boyfriend, Alex Mulholland, both 27, might be the young people any great-grandmother would hope could move nearby.

They care for cats. They work together at Wahlburgers in Palo Alto, where they earn that city's minimum wage – \$15 an hour – plus tips. Mulholland takes classes at De Anza College.

Given the area's housing costs, their relatively meager joint income made living on the Peninsula difficult, but they thought they'd found a workable workaround. For months, they've been living quietly in an RV parked in the driveway of Bain's great-grandmother's house on Madera Avenue in the Belle Haven neighborhood of Menlo Park, a setup that offers them some privacy while still being close enough to be of support to the 93-year-old homeowner.

But come Dec. 3, their housing situation will cease to be an option.



Alex Mulholland and Arlena Bain's RV is parked in a driveway in Belle Haven in Menlo Park. After an anonymous neighbor complained about the RV, code enforcement found the vehicle to be out of compliance with Menlo Park's municipal code. (Photo by Magali Gauthier/The Almanac.)

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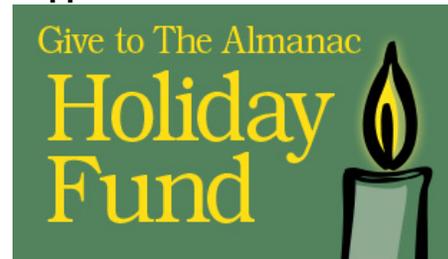
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According to Bain, the problem started in September when Menlo Park's code enforcement officer, Eleonor Hilario, responded to a complaint from an anonymous neighbor about the presence of the RV.

The complaint triggered an inspection, after which Hilario found the RV to be out of compliance with Menlo Park's municipal code, citing sections including the prohibition of RV "storage" on properties zoned for single-family residences. She gave the couple verbal warnings before they received a formal notice of violation on Nov. 7, with an initial deadline of Nov. 25 to comply with the ordinances. The deadline has been extended until Dec. 3, but it still doesn't give the couple long to find a new housing situation, they said.



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Menlo Park Mayor Ray Mueller told The Almanac that he had requested an extension for the couple through the holidays, but the police department denied the request. According to Mueller, the extension was denied because the couple has already been granted an extension.

As Bain explains it, there was lag time between the initial inspection and the issuance of the notice of violation, and that gap created even more stress because she wasn't entirely certain that the enforcement notice would come through. Yet without having information in writing about what part of the code her home was in violation of, she said, she couldn't take the matter to the local legal aid nonprofit, Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto, to see if she'd have any way to fight it.

Given less than a month between the formal notice being sent on Nov. 7 and their hard deadline of Dec. 3, they now have little time to find a new housing situation or find a new location for the RV, Bain said. To comply with the municipal code, Bain and Mulholland will have to move the RV to a new long-term location, whether or not they continue to live in it. They're considering selling it because RV parks and safe parking facilities in the area are full, Bain said.

"People who get evicted from apartments have longer than we have," Bain said. "In a mobile home, it's like we don't have any rights."

The notice of violation includes a copy of municipal code sections, with purple check marks next to where Hilario found the RV to be out of compliance. Hilario declined to comment for this story.

The notice indicates that the RV's siting violates the city's nuisance ordinance in the "menace to safety" category and the "storage in yards" section, which prohibits RVs from being stored in a front or side yard for more than five days. It marks a third violation in that section of the code, under the heading "further limits on motor vehicle storage," stating that no more than one vehicle can be stored on a single-family lot, and laying out specific driveway parameters.

Police Comdr. Rich Struckman told The Almanac that the department is still working with Bain and Mulholland to correct the violations. "This is where we're at," he said. "This has been going on since September."

If they don't correct the violations, though, they will be subject to citation and fines. He added that the way the vehicle is parked creates a fire hazard, and that a previous configuration of the RV made it intrude onto the sidewalk.

"I think the spirit of the ordinance as written long ago is to ... keep the neighborhood tidy," he said. "We have neighbors who are complaining."

"We can't go on forever and ever. Ultimately we have to take action or the problem never goes away."

Limited options

Bain said she has explored moving the RV into a local RV park, but such parks all seem to have waiting lists and are beyond their budget.

And resources suggested by the code enforcement officer that might help other households, such as a housing support program that helps low-income residents secure down payments to buy a property, aren't helpful for their situation.

"We obviously can't afford an apartment if we live in an RV," she said.

On top of their existing challenges with looking for a new housing situation, she added, is that when she's applied for apartments before, she's run into difficulty because applications typically ask for paystubs to confirm income, which don't account for tips, so her income appears lower than it is to potential landlords.

"Even to try (to get) another job to get a higher income in the time they gave us is not possible," she asserted. "The city is forcing us to be homeless and it doesn't need to be that way."

Mulholland's mother, Susyn Almond, who sits on the city of Mountain View's Rental Housing Committee, expressed frustration with the situation.

"I feel like my son and I are sort of the prototype ... of what's happening in Silicon Valley housing," she said.

"I live in a mother-in-law unit in Mountain View; he lives in an RV. ... He's starting a new part of his life, going to college, and gets hit with this even more insecure housing. ... It just kills me."

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Comments

Posted by **Happy Resident** 41 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Sharon Heights
 on Nov 21, 2019 at 2:25 pm
Happy Resident is a registered user.

Move in with grandmother. Continue to help her. Sell the RV and use the proceeds to pay grandmother some rent and pay for groceries. Possible?

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Posted by **Obvious** 42 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Fair Oaks
 on Nov 21, 2019 at 2:48 pm

Moving in with grandma is of course the obvious answer. Instead of having the family solve this simple issue, they are trying to have the city solve it. Living in Grandma's driveway in a RV is not acceptable to the neighborhood. So do the right thing.

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Posted by **Please...** 36 people like this
 a resident of Portola Valley: Ladera
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Possible to have some empathy for a low-income couple?

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Posted by **Member** 34 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Belle Haven
 on Nov 21, 2019 at 3:13 pm

If moving into grandmother's was an option we would of already. This shouldn't be an issue city or family. And other rvs in other parts of Menlo Park aren't having to deal with this. Plus the complaint made towards us was false so... if the city is banning rvs then all rvs should be restricted not specifically just ours. We do pay rent fyi.

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Posted by **No Easy Solutions** 19 people like this
 a resident of Menlo Park: Central Menlo Park
 on Nov 21, 2019 at 3:42 pm

Do agree with Member's comment above. I do see RVs parked in drive ways in MP that have been there for a while. This is not uniform application of the ordinance, just targeted towards those only living in them?