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Retake the 'coal hills': Sutton wants its playground back from shooters and garbage piles

✎ Author: **Zaz Hollander** ⌚ Updated: July 14, 2016 📅 Published July 1, 2016



Targets and an old car are riddled with bullet holes at an impromptu shooting range off of the Jonesville Mine Road on Tuesday, June 28, 2016, in Sutton. (Bob Hallinen / Alaska Dispatch News)

SUTTON — Residents here say uncontrolled target shooting and trash piles have chased them from their favorite recreation areas behind town, and now they want the rowdies gone — but they're not getting help from Alaska State Troopers.

They are looking to reclaim the rough camping areas on the "coal hills" off Jonesville Mine Road and the shores of Slipper Lake.

"There is no safe place around that lake, anywhere," said Martin Johnson, who has lived in the area since 1957. "It's just a constant war all weekend."

Johnson was one of dozens of area residents who attended a town hall meeting Wednesday at Sutton Elementary School. They complained of scary shooting, wild four-wheeling and garbage but said troopers rarely patrol the area and often don't respond to calls for help.

Rep. Jim Colver, a Republican from Palmer facing a primary election challenge in August from a Sutton conservative George Rauscher, convened the meeting and brought two of Alaska's top cops: Public Safety Commissioner Walt Monegan and Col. James Cockrell, head of the Alaska State Troopers. About 50 people attended.

Budget-bound troopers say they don't have the manpower to send regular patrols up Jonesville Road. Capt. Hans Brinke, the supervisor of Mat-Su trooper posts, said 36 troopers working three shifts cover an area the size of West Virginia.



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"If I can get my guys up there, I'm going to try my best," he said.

Most campers are decent, locals say. But a few trash the place and shoot through the night. It's gotten so bad many community members say they are afraid to visit on summer weekends.

Allie Barker and a friend were hiking last summer when, they said, bullets started flying by their heads as they ducked and yelled, hemmed in by heavy brush.

Barker, a Chickaloon-based avalanche forecaster, said at the community meeting she believed someone on an adjacent four-wheeler trail was firing blindly.

"I'm not sure I feel comfortable going back up there again, which is unfortunate because it's one of the most incredible places around and everyone here knows that," she said. "We feel really lucky we weren't injured or killed that day. I hope no one else has to experience that."

A recent death added urgency to the conversation. An Anchorage resident, 30-year-old Adam C. Malaby, was shot and killed last month while taking video of people he knew who were firing guns near the road, according to Col. Cockrell.

Along with talk of increasing enforcement, there's also a local effort supported by the Sutton Community Council to establish a new public-use area for Jonesville similar to that adopted by the state for the Knik River.

The public-use area campaign is led by Rauscher, Colver's opponent in August's Republican primary. Rauscher, a remodeler, is chair of the Jonesville/Slipper Lake Action Committee. The group hopes to have a bill ready in November as a vehicle for the Legislature to create the public-use area.

The state improved campsites along the lake in 2009 and 2012 but didn't have a plan to manage growing pressure from Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna Borough residents, according to the public-use-area campaign.

Along with working with local and state officials on the planning process, Rauscher urged locals themselves to tell people not to shoot in undesignated areas.

"We can all be a part of policing the area ourselves," he said.

Monegan urged residents to call every time they see illegal activity, such as shooting near people or at homes. Troopers say they aren't getting many calls from the area.

"Even if you get no response, we log your call," Monegan said. "The more we hear, the more it builds up. When you actually go apathetic — 'well, they're not going to come so I'm not going to call' — we won't know. Don't give up on us. Call."

Community demands for a formal shooting range got nearly universal support. But developing a shooting range is a complicated process, said Clark Cox, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources' regional manager. Residents need to agree on its location and hours, Cox said.

Colver said any public-use-area legislation is "no sure thing" and noted the bill comes with a \$200,000 price tag. It will be a challenge to pass given the state's grim financial situation, he said.

"If that's the direction we're going, it's just going to take push, hard work and tenacity," Colver said.

About this author

Zaz Hollander

Zaz Hollander is based in Wasilla and covers the Mat-Su region for the ADN.