

TOP STORY

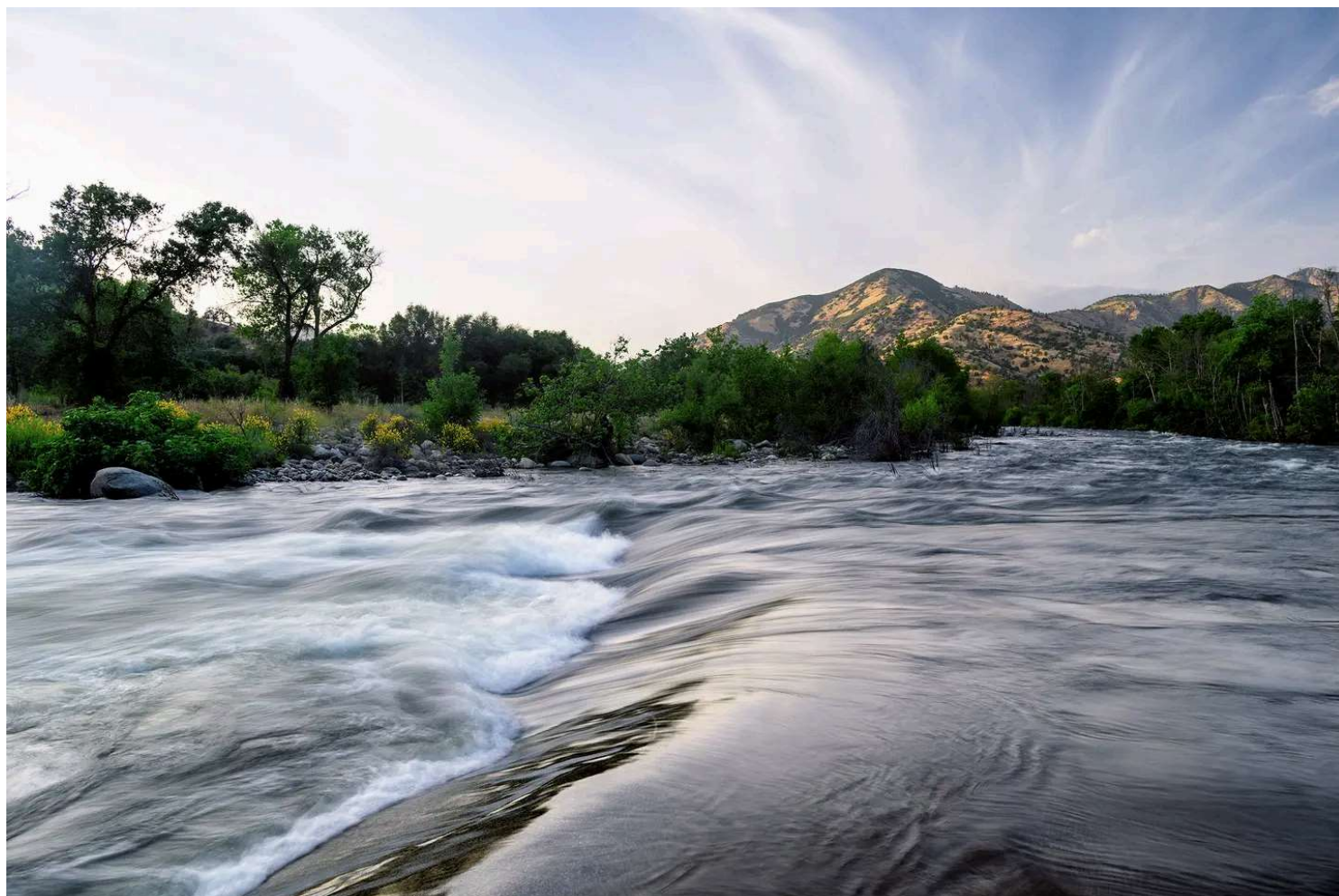
49m ago

FBI releases photos of person of interest in Charlie Kirk assassination

NEWS | BAY AREA & STATE

No kids, endless trash: Life in a California town overrun with short-term rentals

Locals say Three Rivers hardly feels like a community anymore



Kaweah River in Three Rivers, Calif., May 20, 2024.
Eric Kilby via Flickr CC 2.0

By **Sam Mauhay-Moore**, *National Parks Reporter*

Aug 27, 2025



Listen Now: 'I don't have neighbors anymore': How sho

1x

12:12

Everlit

When George Tomi came to Three Rivers in the early 1970s, the biggest local conflict he noticed were scraps between hardened cattle ranchers and a tie-dye-adorned wave of newly arrived hippies. Tomi himself came to town on that wave, hoping to live somewhere slow paced and surrounded by nature.



There aren't many hippies left, Tomi said. In fact, there aren't many people left in general.

"I was riding my bike the other day, and I said to someone, 'Hi, neighbor,'" Tomi told me from behind his desk at the town's museum, where he volunteers. "She said, 'I don't have neighbors anymore. The next five houses down are all Airbnbs.'"

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

He swung his arm out toward the highway and the Kaweah River, whose three intersecting forks the town was named for. "I live on a little dead-end road over there, and there's probably 15 Airbnbs," he added.

If you look up Three Rivers on Airbnb, hundreds of listings, ranging from backyard canvas tents to 11-bedroom riverfront mansions, appear. The town sits a few miles down Highway 198 from the entrance to Sequoia National Park, and for years has been a weekend hotspot for tourists hoping to stay as close to the park as possible while still having access to restaurants, stores and air conditioning. While the town's proximity to the park may be what draws visitors, its own striking beauty — namely the roiling, boulder-strewn Kaweah, surrounded by hills that turn green and flowering in springtime — makes Three Rivers a destination of its own.



Giant sequoias in Sequoia National Park.
Anne Greenberg/Corbis/Getty Images

The town is bustling in the high season. When I visited on a recent Tuesday afternoon, cars fought for makeshift roadside parking spots and diners packed into restaurants along the riverbank. For an unincorporated community of just over 2,000, the place felt lively — but it was also clear that nearly everyone I saw there would be gone within a few days, myself included.

‘We’re losing our community’

Concerns about the effects of short-term rentals on the town came to a head last year, when the Tulare County Board of Supervisors struck down a proposed ordinance that would have placed stricter regulations on short-term rentals in the

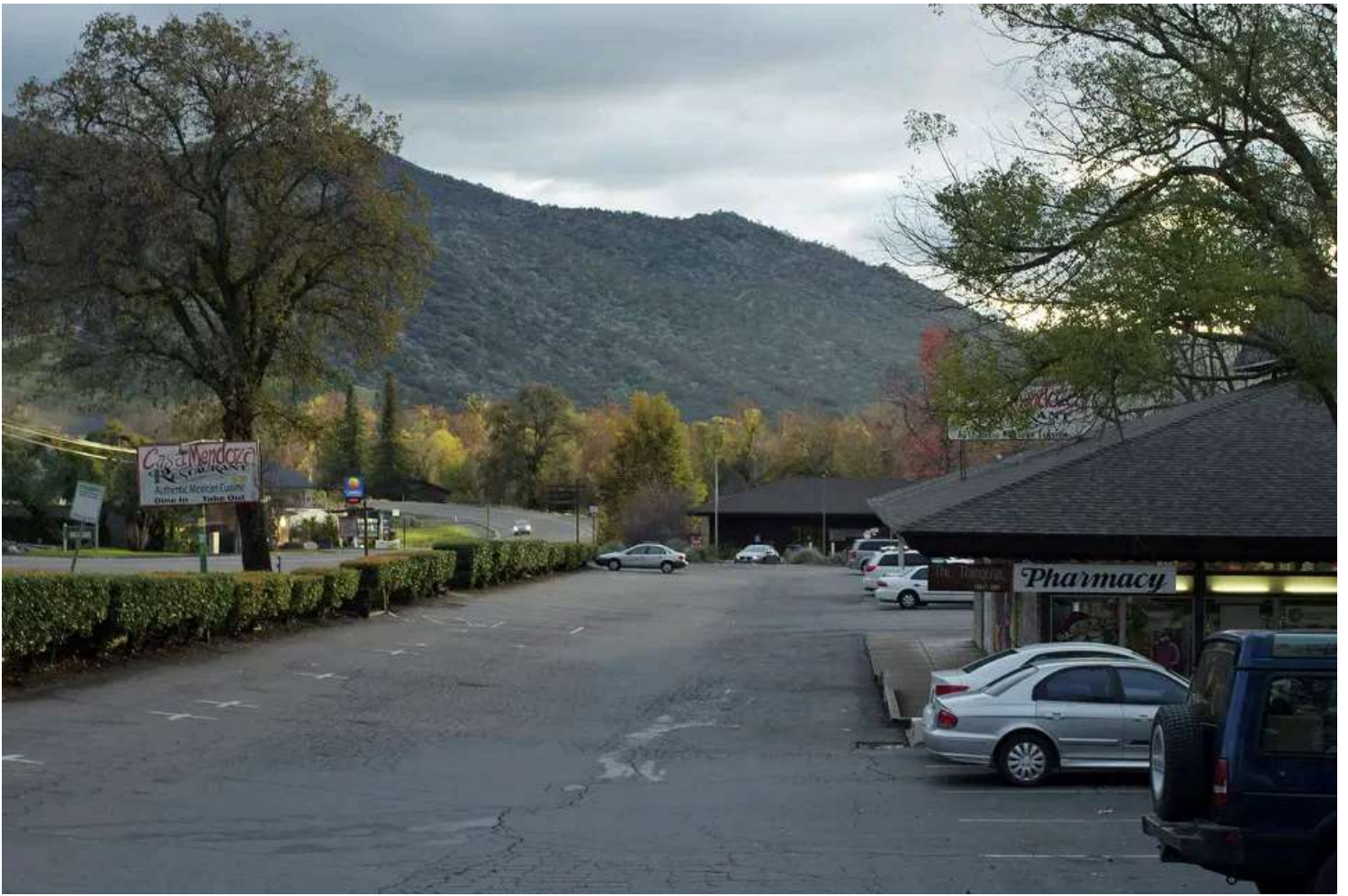
county, including new noise restrictions, trash requirements and occupancy limits. The ordinance sought to address residents' worries about the rental properties, particularly those related to noise and visitors' tendency to dispose of trash improperly, leading to increased bear activity.

The ordinance would have also required the owners of short-term rentals to post signs with their contact information, a move introduced in response to residents' complaints that rental owners live in distant urban areas like Los Angeles or the Bay Area and are therefore largely unreachable if something goes awry.

"The trash is all over the place, and we don't know who to call because the owners are all out of town," Tomi said. "And the guests come here to party, but that's secondary to me. The primary one is we're losing our community."

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad



Three Rivers Calif., Dec. 13, 2014.

David Prasad via Flickr CC 2.0

That latter concern seems to be what's on the forefront of many residents' minds, especially those that have seen Three Rivers change over the decades.

Nancy Brunson, president of the town's museum and owner of the local consignment and crafts store Kaweah Arts, has lived in Three Rivers for 30 years and says she's especially worried about changes she's seen to the school system there.

Three Rivers had about 250 school-aged children in town when she first moved there, Brunson said. Now, she estimates that there's about 70. Kids go to school in Three Rivers until eighth grade, then are bussed half an hour to the Central Valley town of Woodlake to attend high school.

"It changes the nature of a class tremendously, because the smaller the group of kids, the less diverse of an experience they have," Brunson said, adding that the school system canceled its yearly field trip to San Francisco for the first time this year because not enough students signed up for it.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

Brunson credits this change to a lack of affordable single-family housing in town, an issue that many residents feel is exacerbated by the number of short-term rental properties in the area. Family homes are often purchased as vacation rental properties, she said, and any remaining real estate is unaffordable for most young parents.

"Those of us who have businesses in Three Rivers love our visitors, but the transition has been a challenge because there were a lot more young families here 30 years ago, a lot more family activities and things going on at the school," Brunson said. "So it's just kind of changed the nature of the place."

'Nobody wants cheesy hotels'

Disputes regarding the proliferation of short-term rentals are not unique to Three Rivers. From Long Beach to Santa Barbara to Carmel to Lake Tahoe, residents across

California appear to be fed up with the constant revolving door of vacationers that comes with living in an short-term rental hot spot, not to mention the impacts that short-term rental properties have on the state's already-inaccessible housing market. Increased regulations on rental operations have been passed in some of these places as a result, with cities like South Lake Tahoe requiring hosts to file permits with the city and residents of Long Beach and Santa Barbara proposing a ban on short-term rentals altogether. Further south in Irvine, short-term rentals have been banned since 2018.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad



The Kaweah River roars through the landscape, churning over tree branches on March 14, 2023, in Three Rivers, Calif.

Gina Ferazzi/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

However, Three Rivers differs vastly from its more populated and often coastal counterparts: Tucked deep in the foothills, it's relatively isolated from any major urban centers. It sticks out among other towns and cities in the agriculture-dominated Tulare County, whose communities are largely made up of farmworkers and their families. In Three Rivers, demographics skew markedly whiter, older and wealthier than the rest of the region, and the town's percentage of immigrants in its population — about 7% in 2023 — is about a third of that of the county's. After the scenic 45-minute drive to Three Rivers from Highway 99, you'll feel like you've entered a completely different part of California, one where rented Sprinter vans line up along the highway for frozen yogurt and craft beer.

"There's nothing else going on in this place except for the visitors coming through," said Cara Brown, a Three Rivers resident who operates an Airbnb on her property. "We're only a couple thousand people here, but a million people come through the parks, so you have to create a place for them. And nobody wants cheesy hotels."

Brown defies the image many of the town's residents have of short-term rental owners, one of a hyper-wealthy investor who lives in San Francisco or Los Angeles and gobbles up small-town, single-family housing in their spare time. She and her husband have rented out a studio on their property on Airbnb for close to a decade, and have lived in the adjacent main house the entire time.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

BEST OF SFGATE

Local | [There's a mansion hidden directly under the Bay Bridge](#)

Travel | [A Calif. beach so breathtaking homeowners fought to keep it private](#)

Local | [The world's last lost tourist thought Maine was San Francisco](#)

History | [Why a wealthy banker blasted a huge hole in a Bay Area cliff](#)

Get SFGATE's top stories sent to your inbox by [signing up for The Daily newsletter here.](#)

Tensions over short-term rentals and their effect on Three Rivers have become especially fiery in recent years, Brown said, leading her and a group of other local hosts to form a coalition that she says is partially responsible for the failure of last year's ordinance. Brown said that among this group, disgruntled anti-short-term rental residents are referred to as "the pitchfork crew."

"They were mean. They were angry," Brown said. "They never could see somebody else's point of view on the subject."

Profits from running an Airbnb rental have acted as a lifeline during her and her husband's retirement, Brown said, helping to cover housing expenses that might otherwise be unaffordable. In a survey conducted among Airbnb hosts in California, over half of respondents said the income earned through hosting has helped them stay in their home, an Airbnb spokesperson told SFGATE. Seventeen percent said hosting helped them avoid foreclosure or eviction, Airbnb said.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

And while Brown agrees that there's a lack of affordable housing in town, she doesn't think that the solution to the issue lies in restricting rental properties.



Lake Kaweah in Three Rivers, Calif., July 2023.

Jason Edeburn/Getty Images

“People should be able to invest in what they want to invest in. And, you know, we work hard, and there’s just not a lot of other things going on,” Brown said. “It’s not like we’re jugged up against other cities. There’s no place to build additional housing, and I don’t think anyone in this small community wants that.”

The question of whether short-term rentals contribute to America’s housing crisis is contentious and complex. On one hand, some data points to a relation between the enforcement of short-term rental bans or ordinances and a more affordable housing market: One 2023 study found that rent in Irvine went down 3% as a result of the city’s short-term rental ban, and notes that “the decline in rents is more likely to be driven by reallocation of rental supply away from prohibited STR toward long-term rentals.”

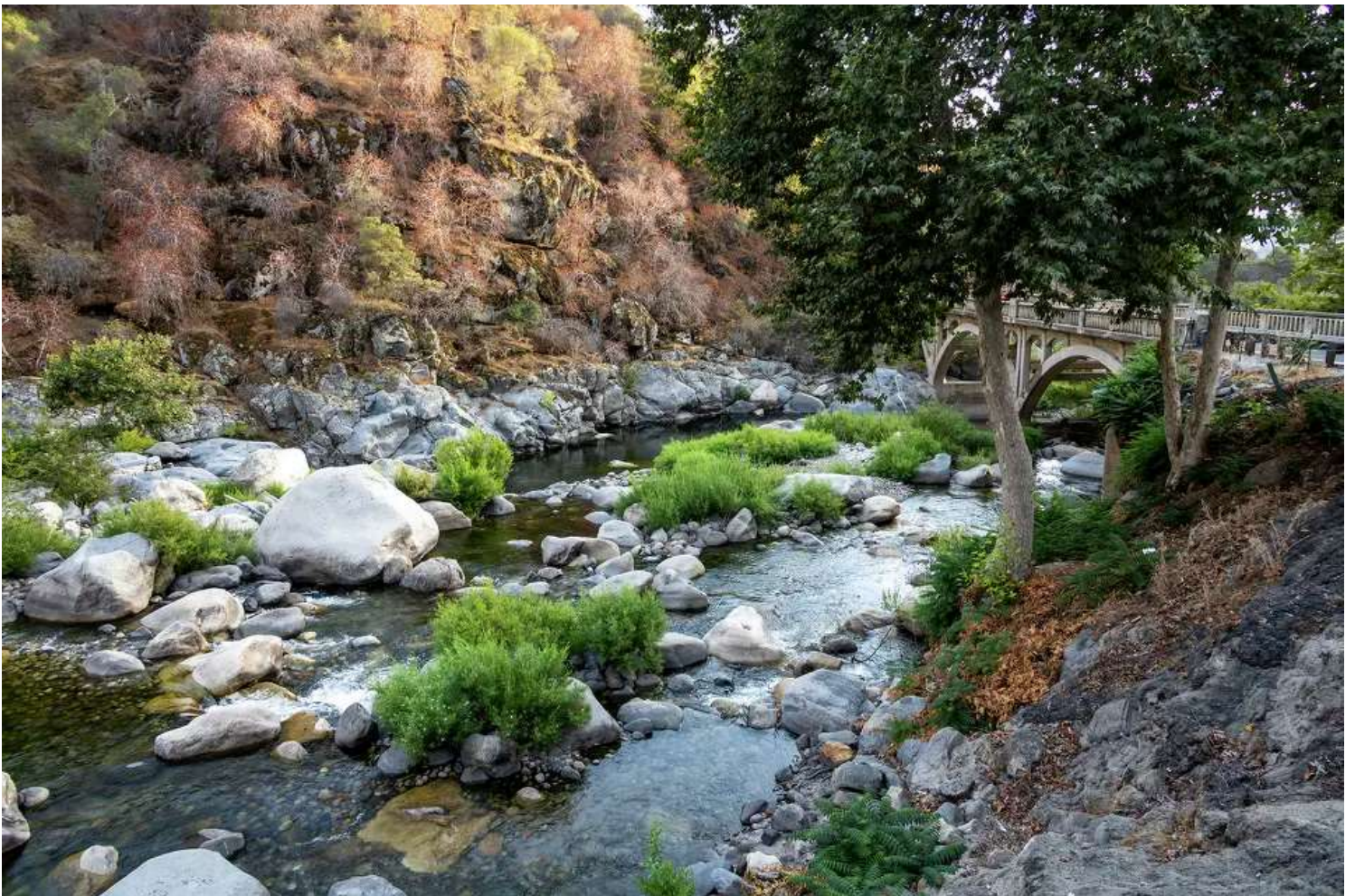
Conversely, bans and restrictions on rentals have occasionally backfired, especially in more tourism-centered locations. In the Colorado mountain town of Telluride, officials overturned a cap on the number of short-term rentals that are able to operate in town after tourism reportedly dropped following its enforcement.

“We’re a tourism economy,” Telluride Councilmember Dan Enright told CNN last year. “We are reliant on tourism dollars to keep the town functioning.”

To that end, Brown said that tourism in Three Rivers is what keeps the town’s small businesses afloat. Local shops and restaurants struggle in wintertime, when visitors and their dollars are sparse, she said. In 2024, Airbnb guests in the U.S. spent an average of \$200 a day at local businesses, according to the company’s spokesperson.

Other residents remain unconvinced. Brunson said that because housing costs in town are so high, several small businesses have had to close their doors due to an inability to find workers who could afford to live nearby. In February, the entire Three Rivers Chamber of Commerce was dissolved after every one of its members resigned, citing low engagement from local business owners and a lack of time and resources among its staff.

ADVERTISEMENT
Article continues below this ad



Pumpkin Hollow Bridge crosses the Kaweah River in Three Rivers, Calif., Oct. 14, 2024.
John Twynam/Getty Images

Brunson has even noticed this affecting operations at the national park, where this year's slew of federal staffing cuts has already created a scanty workforce.

"Before, a three-bedroom house would sometimes go to three or four park employees. So that's eliminated that as well," Brunson said. "They were good workers, but they couldn't afford to live here and couldn't afford the commute."

'We're all upset'

One issue both short-term rental hosts and the so-called "pitchfork crew" in Three Rivers seem to agree on is the topic of where the town's short-term rental and hotel taxes go. Since Three Rivers is unincorporated, any adjustment made to its laws or tax system must go through the county. This also means the money made from taxes on rental properties and hotel rooms all goes back to the county, not the town.

ADVERTISEMENT

Article continues below this ad

According to the [Tulare County Sun-Gazette](#), a report shared at a July 2024 Tulare County Board of Supervisors meeting showed that 63% of the \$3.56 million collected in taxes from short-term rentals and hotels in the county's unincorporated areas came from Three Rivers. Of that, \$1.3 million in taxes came from the town's short-term rentals, compared to \$933,000 from its hotels.

"We're all upset about that," Brown said of where tax funds from Three Rivers are allocated. "We should have, you know, riding paths and walking paths, and a prettier

downtown and so many other things they could do for our town.”

Tomi said that Eddie Valero, the Tulare County supervisor whose district includes Three Rivers, is sympathetic to residents’ concerns regarding short-term rentals. “But he’s just one of five,” Tomi said, “and the others — they’re just not hearing us.”



Slick Rock Recreation Area in Three Rivers, Calif., May 3, 2024.

Mariusz Lopusiewicz/Getty Images

When asked to provide comments on residents’ concerns about short-term rentals, Tulare County spokesperson Jennifer Fawkes pointed to existing county ordinances and penal codes related to noise, trash and fire safety. As for concerns related to the town’s housing market, Fawkes added, “Rental Density and Housing Access are issues that are experienced across the state and are not unique to the Three Rivers area.” Supervisor Valero was not available for comment.

ADVERTISEMENT
Article continues below this ad

Got a tip? Send us the scoop.

DO IT NOW

From his desk at the museum, Tomi told me that when he first came to Three Rivers, the community boasted a number of clubs and sports leagues for locals to join. Black and white photos of sports teams and neighborhood organizations are displayed all over the building, scattered around other artifacts and memorabilia spanning generations of the town's history. In them, rows of people gaze out from behind the camera, cemented in a lost age.

"None of that is around anymore," Tomi said. "We don't have anything like that anymore because we don't have residents."

More National Parks

- Netflix murder mystery set in Yosemite leaves park experts seething
- Muir Woods exhibit is first casualty of White House directive to erase history
- Mountain lion attacks 4-year-old at Olympic National Park
- 'S—t is hitting the fan': Disaster unfolding at Yosemite's iconic hotel