

# L.A. County's Private Property War

By [Mars Melnicoff](#)

Published first by [LA Weekly News](#), Thursday, Jun 23 2011

[Click here to watch our video exclusive, "L.A. County's War on Desert Rats."](#)

## In Llano, in the middle of the

Southern California high desert, a bewhiskered Jacques Dupuis stands in front of what was once his home. His laid-back second wife, Marcelle, her long, silver hair blowing in the breeze, takes a drag on her Marlboro Red as they walk inside and, in thick French Canadian accents, recount the day in 2007 when the government came calling. "That's the seat I have to offer you," she tells a visitor, motioning to the exposed, dusty wooden floor planks in what was once a cozy cabin where Jacques spent much of his life, raising his daughter with his first wife.



A cheery facade, but on the backside Jacques and Marcelle Dupuis have begun dismantling every board and nail of heir home.

On Oct. 17, 2007, Marcelle opened the door to a loud knock. Her heartjumped when she found a man backed by two armed county agents in bulletproof vests. She was alone in the cabin, a dot in the vast open space of the [Antelope Valley](#), without a neighbor for more than half a mile. She feared that something had happened to her daughter, who was visiting from [Montreal](#).

The men demanded her driver's license, telling her, "This building is not permitted — everything must go." Normally sassy, Marcelle handed over her ID —even her green card, just in case. Stepping out, she realized that her 1,000-square-foot cabin was surrounded by men with drawn guns. "You have no right to be here," one informed her. Baffled and shaking with fear, she called her daughter — please come right away.

As her ordeal wore on, she heard one agent, looking inside their comfortable cabin, say to another: "This one's a real shame — this is a real nice one."

A "shame" because the authorities eventually would enact some of the most powerful rules imaginable against rural residents: the order to bring the home up to current codes or dismantle the 26-year-old cabin, leaving only bare ground.

"They wouldn't let me grandfather in the water tank," Jacques Dupuis says. "It is so heart-wrenching because there was a way to salvage this, but they wouldn't work with me. It was, 'Tear it down. Period.' "

In order to clear the title on their land, the Dupuises are spending what would have been peaceful retirement days dismantling every board and nail of their home — by hand — because they can't afford to hire a crew.

Tough code enforcement has been ramped up in these unincorporated areas of L.A. County, leaving the iconoclasts who chose to live in distant sectors of the Antelope Valley frightened, confused and livid. They point the finger at the Board of Supervisors' Nuisance Abatement Teams, known as NAT, instituted in 2006 by [Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael Antonovich](#) in his sprawling Fifth District. The teams' mission: "to abate the more difficult code violations and public nuisance conditions on private property."

*L.A. Weekly* found in a six-week investigation that county inspectors and armed DA investigators also are pursuing victimless misdemeanors and code violations, with sometimes tragic results. The government can define land on which residents have lived for years as "vacant" if their cabins, homes and mobile homes are on parcels where the land use hasn't been legally established. Some have been jailed for defying the officials in downtown Los Angeles, while others have lost their savings and belongings trying to meet the county's "final zoning enforcement orders." Los Angeles County has left some residents, who appeared to be doing no harm, homeless.

Some top county officials insist that nothing new is unfolding. [Michael Noyes](#), deputy in charge of code enforcement for [Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley](#), says, "We've had a unit in the office through the '70s and '80s." But key members of the county NAT team say that "definitely, yes," a major focus on unincorporated areas was launched in 2006. Cooley declined to comment through his media spokesman.

Many residents insist a clearing-out is under way in these 2,200 square miles of arid land an hour north of L.A., a mountain-ringed valley at the western tip of the [Mojave Desert](#) named for elegant pronghorn herds that were all but wiped out by an 1884-94 drought. Their anxiety has prompted conspiracy theories about whether the county has its own plans for their land.

The crackdown has the strong backing of Antonovich, whose spokesman, [Tony Bell](#), says of its critics, "I've probably

ruined your story because you want to say it's a horrible thing going on. ... We have gotten a very, very positive response from the community."

Not everyone. [Oscar Castaneda](#), pastor of [Lancaster's](#) historic adobe Sanctuary [Seventh-day Adventist Church](#), built in 1934 and featured in [Kill Bill](#), recalls the day he says he was ordered to "freeze" in front of his mobile home on isolated land where his only neighbors are rattlesnakes. Decades ago, Castaneda says the county gave him verbal approval to live there in a mobile home. He told the NAT team, which began photographing his spread: "Listen, I've been living over here for 22 years. And nobody has come over here to bother me."



In his huge garage, Tom Fidger hosts AVTO, the Antelope Valley Truckers Organization, formed to fight back.

He says a county team member replied, "Well, we're 22 years late."

[Tim Grover](#), who leads NAT as supervisor of the property rehabilitation section of L.A. County's Building and Safety Division within the Public Works Department, says desert dwellers are not being treated overly harshly and the teams have a duty to seek out public safety, health and zoning violations.

"We don't just storm people's property and do things without permission," Grover says, but, he adds, "If it's 'vacant' land or 'vacant' property, then there's no expectation of privacy."

The battle in the desert attracted national attention two weeks ago when [Alan Kimbel "Kim" Fahey](#) lost a Los Angeles Superior Court criminal case over his whimsical, soaring Phonehenge compound in the Mojave Desert, built from 108 telephone poles — but without sufficient permits. A hero to many for taking on the county, he now must work out a plan for tearing down his colorful, barn-style home; big rainbow-painted "tree house" on stilts; cabin designed to look like a railroad car; 70-foot tower of stained-glass windows; interconnecting labyrinth of bridges; and pre-existing old buildings.

Fahey, a [Santa Claus](#) look-alike with a love for [Harley Davidsons](#) and denim overalls, is still upbeat, saying of his government foes: "They are just county blobs, they don't care about people." Save Phonehenge West has more than 28,000 [Facebook](#) fans.

[\*\*\*For more photos, see "Desert Rats: Scenes from the Antelope Valley."\*\*\*](#)

Powerful county officials seem eager to downplay the unfolding drama in the desert. Antonovich's communications deputy, Bell, told the *Weekly*: "NAT teams are used when there is toxic waste ... environmental crises ... potentially a parolee who has escaped. Maybe methamphetamine labs, or maybe illegal dog breeding. Very, very serious violations. ... I remember one time, folks were attacked with half a dozen wild boars so big they go up to your chest."

Those are not the stories told by people targeted by a system they say has morphed into a taste patrol. The desert's fierce individualists — a racially mixed bunch including Latinos, whites and African-Americans — have banded together to resist the crackdown. A truckers' advocacy group, the [Antelope Valley Truckers Organization](#) (AVTO), created in response to the county actions, draws an audience to its monthly meetings larger than the locally elected [Littlerock Town Council](#), an advisory group to the county. And the [Littlerock](#) council has been upended by the locals, its members replaced with an anti-crackdown majority.

The Littlerock Town Council has proposed amendments to the Community Standards District that would take the desert dwellers, and longtime reality, into account. [Bill Guild](#), president of the town council, says their mission is to rewrite the rules enacted by a county seat that is "almost immune to common sense."

**In 2005, Cowboy Emeterio** thought he was all alone. A maintenance construction helper for the Los Angeles City Department of Water and Power, [Emeterio](#) had enjoyed a peaceful relationship with the authorities before the Nuisance Abatement Teams existed. "The guy would just tell me, 'You know what, I need you to clean this here, I need you to put a fence around these things here in case some kids come around here and start wanting to climb over, so they don't get hurt.'"



"They made me remove my hairpiece. Nobody's ever seen me without my hairpiece." Kenny Perkins, arrested for illegal storage on his land.

In 2006, when Antonovich formed a NAT program in his district, [Deputy District Attorney David Campbell](#) was assigned to prosecute those who resisted the rules. "Oh man, I was one of the first motherfuckers on their docket," Emeterio says. NAT "didn't even have a name for themselves when they first started." But then they "started telling me and threatening me that I had to leave. And I wouldn't leave, so they took me to court to make me leave."

Emeterio claims that Campbell told his public defender, "Well, he's got 'vacant' land, and we want it vacant." His voice rising, he explains the county's view: "You're not allowed to have anything there! Not a storage container, not a fuckin' tire, not a nuthin'. Not a tractor. Nothing! ... Well, he wanted me off the property, and I told him, 'I'm not going anywhere, man. We're taking this to the box.'"

But government, Emeterio found, is hard to beat. Although many landowners now realize they should have known this fundamental law, the requirement to obtain land-use permits for such things as living in a mobile home or storing a truck, cargo container or stack of wood was news to many. This news was delivered by NAT teams, often made up of DA investigators, Sheriff's deputies, health inspectors, Building and Safety inspectors, zoning officers and animal control officers.

Grover, head of NAT, says, "We are trying to get the message out about what we do. We have nothing to hide, we feel. But a lot of people don't like what you did to them and so they'll make up a story ... and people start believing things that never happened." For example, Grover says, DA investigators are armed for the safety of the entire NAT team as they approach an unknown structure in the desert — not to intimidate residents.



Fred and Linda Kirpsie: "This is not an illegal lifestyle, it's our happiness."

Emeterio says his wife spent a day in jail a couple years ago. The Emeterios say she was arrested for trespassing on their own land; the county NAT team says that never happens. But they were forced out of their large camper known as a fifth wheel — they had no permit for living there. Hauled into criminal court by the district attorney, Emeterio was given six months to obtain all his permits, but it took him three years. The couple were ordered to remove everything from their 5 acres, down to the piles of firewood he had long been splitting and selling.

Now he's building a prefab home — with permits — but the couple is no longer living together due to the resulting, intense stress. He's now homeless — "playing musical chairs," is how he puts it — and on probation for defying the county's cleanup orders.

About the time in 2006 that the Emeterios were targeted, Chip and [Amalia Romary](#) were pulled over in their vehicle in [Palmdale](#). The man he thought was a traffic cop issued him a curious ticket, Chip Romary says: A citation for illegal land use. "I received a traffic ticket for illegal land use. Illegal land use. A traffic ticket."

Their story helped fuel a growing fear that the county government is tracking people using inordinate resources and invasive techniques. "I bought a piece of property, 6 and a half acres," Romary says of the land under contention, "a wonderful piece of property. It was my life. It was everything that I wanted. It had a foundation, had water, had septic. I inherited a mobile home

from my grandparents" in which he and Amalia lived.

"I showed up in court not knowing what this was all about, and they said, 'You are illegally living on your land.' Now, how that's possible, I don't know."

Romary focuses much of his wrath on prosecutor Campbell, whom he blames for his four-day stint in jail. "My life is now a nightmare," he says. "The courthouse is so corrupt, it's like a mob."

In 2006 and 2007, these and other stories began to be heard along the Sierra Highway, at parties and at the used goods and mercantile Trading Post on Pearblossom Highway in Littlerock. Tow-truck driver [Richard Mesny](#) was



Oscar and Aracelis Castaneda at his church, where *Kill Bill* was filmed

in trouble for storing numerous inoperable cars on his land; [Lawrence Hansen](#), a retired electrician and former shop teacher, was under orders to remove "trash, junk and debris" that he says were his tools and construction materials.

Among those talking were the Dupuises. Jacques Dupuis had built their Llano cabin amidst the Joshua trees to code in 1984, but obtained insufficient permits and faced extensive red tape in getting his paperwork approved. An experienced builder, he recently worked as general superintendent on the "adaptive reuse" of a 17-story high-rise in downtown L.A., transforming it from offices to condos. So Dupuis figured he could get "after the fact" permits, which are granted to many who build to code in Southern California.

But codes have dramatically changed. The water well the county now required — the Dupuises use a tank supplied by a water truck — could cost \$85,000 and wasn't guaranteed to produce water. The county also aggressively acted to force them to remove a cargo container — which can be seen only by passing hawks.

But [Oscar Gomez](#), a zoning official on a county NAT team that took the *Weekly* on a ride-along in June, says such violations "bring the property value down. ... There are actually people that own all the property around them, even if they haven't built there yet."

The Dupuises couldn't afford an attorney with experience in this type of criminal law, and they lost to the county on the cargo container issue. They sued the county to remove from their records the land-use violations caused by their lack of a well. But the suit was dismissed.

Reacting to multiple reports such as the Dupuises', of being confronted by teams with guns, NAT team members who took the *Weekly* on the ride-along laughed and shook their heads. [John Yacovone](#), a DA investigator, says, "We've heard those stories, too. It's not the way we work. We don't approach with our guns drawn."

But the stories are widespread and persistent. In November 2006, Fred and [Linda Kirpsie](#), an off-the-grid family living atop a 4,000-foot mountain, were wondering how county officials "found" their cluster of aging mobile homes and huge scrap-metal collection, at the end of four-wheel-drive-only Kirpsie Road. Did they use [Google Earth](#)? Helicopters?

Despite their extreme lifestyle, the Kirpsies had lived on "Kirpsie Mountain" for 32 years, and Fred penned "Ore Car Update," a gold-mining column, for the *Acton/Agua Dulce News*. But in late 2006, when the Kirpsies returned home from a chore, their mentally disabled adult son, Paul, told them the authorities had visited.

The Kirpsies claim an armed team wearing black flak jackets pulled up in black SUVs and told Paul that his family had "no right to be here." The NAT team returned multiple times to issue orders to remove great heaps of items from the property.

"It's not an illegal lifestyle," Kirpsie says. "This is our happiness."

Criminally prosecuted, the Kirpsies agreed in March to a plea deal in which they will clear their land of every item, thus avoiding jail, says Guild of the Littlerock Town Council. They are moving to a mining town in [Nevada](#).

But some don't have the resources to start over. [Joey Gallo](#), a disabled veteran on a \$985 monthly pension, like the Kirpsies and Dupuises, says he also was approached by an armed NAT team. They returned several times, each time ratcheting up the citations against him, he says.

"I said, 'Well, look, we've complied. We've taken the trash away ... we picked all the weeds away. And the place looked really nice and clean.' And they said, 'OK, now the motor home has to go. It can't be here. And the sheds have to go.' "

With the weeds removed and the trash cleared, Gallo was horrified when the county ordered him to tear down his simple, garage-like home. "It has a bedroom. It has a bathroom, it has a kitchenette, all that," he says, close to tears.

Some residents believe that county Nuisance Abatement Teams order the more modest compliance actions first, such as weed-clearing, then build up to ordering residents to remove their homes, saving the county from paying for costly cleanup once a dweller with little financial means is pushed out.

Grover denies this out of hand, saying, "Our goal is to educate them about code violations. We do not want to push them out of their land."

Gallo, who is diabetic and positive for HIV and hepatitis C, has an annual income just \$930 over the federal government's poverty line, and no family to turn to. He fears the county will force him

off his land soon, and he gets choked up and tearful easily. He's distraught over what may become of his beloved dog and cat.

Interestingly, county officials appear to understand what they are forcing Gallo into: A recent NAT visit was from "a lady at the gate," he says angrily, who handed him a flier for Stand Down, a program for homeless vets.

Until the county enforcers came calling, Gallo led a stable life. He wasn't in any danger of becoming homeless.

**Inevitably, these complaints** reached the county's elected advisory board, the Littlerock Town Council. Bill Guild was president of it when a group of truckers, who live in large numbers in Littlerock, came to it in late 2007.

[Scott Sterner](#), who got hit with violations for having two seagoing containers on his acre of land — a common practice among his far-flung neighbors — wanted to know, whose standards were they being made to live by?

"You guys ever see the thing you get in the mail?" Sterner asked a crowd of truckers and others invited to speak at the Littlerock Town Council last year. "Looks like the Nazis wrote it." To widespread murmurs of agreement, he told the audience that his 2007 citation from L.A. County consisted of: "You're fined, you're going to jail, we're lien-ing your property."

To comply with one rule barring any nonpermitted structure larger than 120 square feet on private property, Sterner hired a worker to cut his two cargo containers into three parts with a blowtorch. The result is much uglier, but technically it complies with the county's A-1 zoning code for light agriculture. Sterner says, "I got a big mess in my backyard now."

Before NAT came around, Sterner had two valuable, sturdy cargo containers — and no neighbor gave a damn. Now, Guild says, Sterner has "six things that are not earthquake-safe, they're really nothing. He's out \$4,000 or \$5,000."

"At first it seemed like [NAT teams] were focusing on trucks, then truck containers, then cars, then boats, then RVs, then trailers" parked on their owners' land, Guild says. But once the county Nuisance Abatement Teams got access to these parcels far off the beaten track, the crackdown widened to building codes — in a region where almost every home has code violations.

"Technically, almost everybody out here is violating a code — so if they want to go after you, they can," says [Amy Konstantelos](#), an attorney representing some of those targeted. "So am I — my fence is too high because I have animals that I don't want to get out."

In early 2008, local truckers had had enough. With Guild as their only champion on the Littlerock Town Council, they created the Antelope Valley Truckers Organization. Guild quit the council to join the group's leadership, and ultimately the group met directly with Antonovich. Little, they say, came of it.

More truckers appeared to tell their stories at AVTO meetings, held in the huge garage behind the

home of [Tom Fidger](#), another targeted trucker who was fighting to keep his diesel truck and two containers on his land on 90th Street East in Littlerock. [Tim Dennis](#), a former heavy equipment operator in Juniper Hills, was under orders to clear every item — including seven cargo containers — off his 10 acres. On 77th Street East, truckers Oscar and [Mayra Arevalo](#) gave up fighting L.A. County. They drove their big rig to [Guatemala](#), their home country, to store it.

At one early AVTO meeting, a resident stood up to complain about his plight, but he wasn't a trucker and barely got any notice. He was Kim Fahey, the defiant Phonehenge builder who would become a rallying figure, a code enforcement resister who made headlines nationally when he lost his 5-year fight in court in early June.

Fahey points out that those who purportedly "hate" his buildings remain anonymous. "They said it was A. Nonymous," he jokes. "If I ever run into A. Nonymous in a bar, I'm going to kick his ass."

But Fahey is serious when he reflects on the implications of his trial, saying, "The story is more important than me, because they are doing this to thousands of people. I'm just trying to bring it to the forefront."

As residents like Fahey, Emeterio and Gallo trickled into meetings, it became apparent the anger was not trucker-specific. AVTO evolved into a group also trying to help non-truckers.

They included [Kenny Perkins](#) and his wife, a nurse, who keep beautiful, restored 1920s-through-'70s cars on their desert land and rent them for use in movies, such as [Angelina Jolie](#) starrer [Changeling](#). His current neighbors are cool with it. Lore has it that Perkins' ex-neighbor complained to the county because somebody turned him in for his own nonpermitted dirt bike motocross track.

When Perkins and his wife returned from a trip to [Scotland](#) in late 2008, he says, he found a notice on his door. He called the [Department of Regional Planning](#) listed on that notice, but says they never called back. Finally, a Nuisance Abatement Team came to the Perkinses' yard in [Acton](#) and asked him his name, but Perkins said he was "[Kenny Stuart](#)" to screw with them, he says. "I almost said my name was [Marco Polo](#)," he recalls with a small smile.

According to Perkins, the county returned with an arrest warrant, charged him with eight counts of storing or parking nonpermitted items on his acreage, and hauled him off. "I was humiliated because I'd never been in trouble before. I had to remove everything from my pockets. They made me remove my hairpiece. No one's ever seen me without my hairpiece."

Required to move a building, three mobile homes, an RV and shipping containers he was renting out for storage on his 5 acres, he began losing \$2,000 a month, had to sell some of his rare cars, lost his good credit standing and had to give up a [Marina del Rey](#) boat slip, forced to part with his beloved 1966 cabin cruiser.

Perkins says before his case was closed, he was ordered to take odd measures, such as covering up half of his "Movie Ranch" sign so it just says "Ranch" because he's not permitted to run a business — renting vintage cars — out of his home. He was forced to move one outbuilding that wasn't "set

back" enough from a 5-mile-long private dirt road, used only by his family and a few neighbors.

Pastor Castaneda, who presides at the historical Sanctuary Seventh-day Adventist Church, is among many who say Los Angeles County is drumming up cases against harmless desert rats who bother nobody and are valued members of the community.

He and his wife, Aracelis, live in their comfortable mobile home in Lake Los Angeles on 2.5 acres situated, inarguably, in the middle of nowhere down a long dirt road surrounded by desert.

But last year, he was approached by NAT numerous times for violations such as neatly stored but inoperable vehicles he repairs for income; "debris" including a rowboat the Castanedas were turning into a decorative planter; and living on the land illegally. Ultimately, the Castanedas received a citation stating that the L.A. County Board of Supervisors had confirmed a finding that "the property is substandard, declared the property a public nuisance because it is: injurious to health; offensive to the senses; and obstructs the free use of neighboring property so as to interfere with the comfortable enjoyment of life and property."

A "neighbor" had complained, the county says.

The problem is, the Castanedas have no neighbors.

**The debate over government** standards versus private property is common in the U.S., but Antelope Valley involves some of the more perplexing issues.

[Robert McNamara](#) is an attorney at the [Institute for Justice](#), which litigates nationwide on behalf of individuals whose rights are violated by the government. Property rights is a key area in which "the courts are completely deferent to government, and have stopped acting as a check on government," he says.

On the other side, [Paul Habibi](#), a professor of real estate at the UCLA Anderson School of Management and a landlord who owns 75 apartment buildings, says code enforcement is "a necessary evil," particularly for safety. "If there's an earthquake — or if electrical is not up to code — it could short-circuit and the building could catch on fire."

Moreover, he says, "Zoning is there to protect land and property owners. You can't build a factory next to a school. Neighbors have a right for property next to them to conform to the same codes they do."

But McNamara says codes are being created by people who are "out of touch," then enforced by "a set of people who are of the mindset: 'We are going to enforce these 600 pages of codes.' The problem is, what gets lost is, there are actual people there trying to live their lives."

The U.S. is full of property containing structures that don't comply with zoning codes, he says. Almost inevitably, selective enforcement occurs, "because you could technically kick everyone out. So you end up picking on people you don't like — or whose neighbors don't like them. These code enforcement people think they are making the world better by kicking these people out of their homes."

He and his organization see it as "clearly government run amok. ... Increasingly complex codes being imposed with no judicial oversight. [The] basic ability of people to use their property and live in their homes is being compromised."

[Kimon Manolius](#), a partner at [Hanson Bridgett](#) law firm in San Francisco, heads the firm's public agency litigation practice group. A former prosecutor for the city and county of San Francisco, he represents public agencies enforcing codes. "If it's not fixed, the county has little to do but sue because it endangers life or limb or public safety in some way," Manolius says. He says he has never been involved in a case that didn't deal with a "real problem."

Real problems to Manolius would be "falling stairwells ... running a drug lab, repainting a house and making lead paint airborne, or mixing medical waste and normal waste."

Manolius' dramatic descriptions contrast with the violations described by many Antelope Valley residents targeted by NAT. [Tim Cavanaugh](#), senior editor of *Reason*, a libertarian magazine, says Los Angeles County has "started going after the lifestyle that has existed forever in the Antelope Valley." And such campaigns, Cavanaugh says, can escalate.

McNamara points to Redwing, Ariz., where his institute is fighting the city's sweeping code enforcement. The government there wants to "look in every single rental unit in the city ... literally root around in your closet."

[Joe Rajkovacz](#), director of regulatory affairs for [Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association](#), says there is no doubt L.A. County has launched a campaign to change life in the high desert, whether it admits it or not.

Rajkovacz, whose group is the largest trucking association in North America, for 29 years "wintered over" in Antelope Valley, where his sister lives.

Her 10 acres include a pear orchard where he parked his big rig for years. "Do that today, and you get a ticket," he says.

But several NAT team members said times are changing in the Antelope Valley; city people are moving to the desert and they expect a higher level of cleanliness and conformity. Of big rigs parked on private property, Grover says, "You know, you're parking semi trucks in the backyard of a residential neighborhood. It's not necessarily approved to do that."

But Rajkovacz suggests that Antonovich's code enforcement pressure on independent truckers in the desert reveals that Los Angeles County leaders, including Antonovich, are ignorant about the trucking industry. "He probably thinks there are six or seven big companies," Rajkovacz says, but in fact small-business truckers who own 20 trucks or fewer make up 96 percent of the industry. People with one truck make up half of all registered "motor carriers" in the U.S.

"A person owning one truck is not going to own a terminal — they're going to choose to live in a rural area" where they can park a semi truck, he says. "It just boggles the mind, when you look at L.A. metro — a complete lack of respect for these small businesses."

With truckers integral to L.A.'s status as a leading goods-transportation hub, Rajkovicz says the attitude of " 'Now we are going to show up with guns' — it's insanity. Treating taxpaying citizens like criminals. ... And Antonovich says he wants a transport hub in Antelope Valley."

On Antonovich's website, he does tout "an 'inland port' for the Antelope Valley to encourage the movement of long-distance freight to and from the ports of Los Angeles and [Long Beach](#) by rail." Truckers would pick up the containers in Antelope Valley. But county officials say they can't park on much of the land they own.

Government officials have "no idea — they think you can just park your truck in a big dirt lot," Rajkovicz says. "But if you don't park in a secure area, you get vandalized." A new truck runs \$130,000 or more. When Scott Sterner, the trucker who chopped his two containers into pieces to meet county code, left his rig overnight at a construction site to which he was hauling material — an effort to comply with county orders not to store his rig on his own land — his truck was stripped.

"They're not talking about setting up warehouses," Rajkovicz says. "They live in the high desert, a lot in Antelope Valley. There's a reason they live in rural, downtrodden areas — because that's all they can afford."

Tony Bell, Antonovich's spokesman, says, "To say the whole community is filled with truckers and construction workers — I don't think so." But AVTO cites California [DMV](#) statistics showing that Littlerock's ZIP code, 93543, has 266 Class A drivers. Multiply that by four, to represent the average family, and 1,064 people may be directly supported by truckers, out of a population of about 11,000 living in 3,600 households.

The crackdown, and the denial by some that a crackdown is under way, have fueled speculation as to Antonovich's, Cooley's and the NAT teams' motives. Residents suggest "they need to justify their jobs — and fill their budget." Others fear a land grab for future development plans. Bell calls that an "absurd" idea that he won't "validate" with a response.

But McNamara, working for an organization that hauls government entities into court, says: "That certainly does happen. We have seen zoning enforcement that can be explained by nothing else." The other key motivator, he says, is "bureaucratic bloody-mindedness."

Cavanaugh suggests what is under way in the high desert is an intolerance toward working-class and poor people who are "different." "Thank God they don't have resources to go around enforcing everything," he says. "It may not be your cup of tea, but that's the way people live."

**The desert denizens have** learned a lot from their political and legal mistakes. They're better organized than they were a few years ago, and they're learning unfamiliar government lingo like "Community Standards District."

In late 2009, when several seats opened on the Littlerock Town Council, a raft of candidates angry at the county crackdown ran, and won.

Other supporters, such as [David Lewis](#), who lives in the desert but has been issued no code or zoning citations, are being drawn to the cause. Lewis set up the Phonehenge West Facebook page to draw attention not only to Fahey's Phonehenge battle but to the broader dispute.

Now Lewis has coined the idea of the "[Teflon](#) Letter," a document to be used against the county's claim that an anonymous neighbor has complained about code or zoning violations. In Teflon Letters, those who hope to live in peace without undertaking extensive code-compliance actions collect the signatures of neighbors who say they have no complaints with how they are living.

Tom Fidger, who hosts the AVTO trucker meetings and recently fought the county to store his diesel truck and two containers on his land, tried out the Teflon Letter approach. After collecting the signatures of his far-flung neighbors, he sent it to county officials.

"I haven't heard a word from them since," Fidger says. In the Teflon Letter, "All my neighbors said that what I did never bothered them, and never has, and wasn't going to."

*Reach the writer at [marsmelnicoff@gmail.com](mailto:marsmelnicoff@gmail.com).*