

# Santa Cruz Sleepers Protest

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significant pressure on CCH to keep Coral Street open, or allow another group to run the campground on the vacant CCH property, at least until construction of their costly Community House project began.

CCH, with City Councilmember Celia Scott sitting on its Board of Directors, not only refused to run the campground during the interim, it refused to allow anyone else to use the property — probably for fear of the “uppity homeless agitators” to return and demand the property be put to its proper and original homeless use.

In 1987, the site was purchased with federal Stewart McKinney funding with the understanding that the homeless would be using it. Like numerous other projects so funded after the 1989 earthquake, this promise was quickly broken, ironically by a group raising funding on behalf of the homeless (with no significant homeless component on its Board).

After nine months, with another million in CCH's coffers and the price of its project up by 70% (from \$1.3 to \$2 million), the field that a year ago provided sanctuary, privacy, and a measure of security for 100-300 people was still locked and empty — and will probably remain so until late next spring, when 10 modular trailers will provide rooms (drug-tested, no visitors, no-private-phones) at a cost of \$600-plus per month for those lucky enough to retain their SSI checks.

Federal HUD funding has emboldened Community House, but it seems more likely that those with the capacity to pay will be given preference to those without means, if and when the costly white elephant actually opens up.

CCH hinged on Paul Lee, Homeless Community Resource Center director Karen Gillette, and City Councilmember Scott Kennedy (who, with Mayor Rotkin, personally closed Coral Street back in December, 1995) then casually put the nix on an alternate outdoor campground as the funding for Community House sailed through with unanimous approval (except for the homeless, who opposed it in speech after speech). All three of these community “leaders” have supposedly opposed the Sleeping Ban for years, but refused to use their power and influence publicly to change the City's most infamous local law.

Indeed, CCH's killing of the homeless campground at Coral Street was particularly significant in Santa Cruz because of the 18-year-old Sleeping Ban. The first and fifth sections of the City's Camping Ban explicitly make sleeping per se and covering up with blankets after 11 p.m. a crime punishable by a \$162 fine, and then by up to six months in jail and a \$1000 fine for a second offense within 48 hours.

Mayor Rotkin, besieged by criticism of the Sleeping Ban in his reelection campaign, frequently resorted to inflammatory distortions. Activists wanted “to sleep in the streets, anywhere and everywhere,” he claimed wildly. “The county's 10 million homeless will come to Santa Cruz” if the

Sleeping Ban were lifted. Demonstrators “wanted” to be arrested, and “we're just obliging them to ‘help’ them with their civil disobedience.” Panhandlers were producing a problem that could “become too dangerous to go downtown.” With the campground space reserved for the multi-million dollar Community House, homeless people should “return to their previous arrangements” (presumably hiding from the police or heading out of town).

Rotkin repeatedly claimed that police were only arresting people at the vigil, but not elsewhere in town — a claim consistently and repeatedly contradicted by dozens of accounts from homeless people, with tickets in hand to prove it. The official line was that sleepers were only disturbed (a) on complaint, or (b) if they were in one of six areas regularly patrolled by the police. Observers were uncertain if Rotkin was swallowing this whopper whole from Police Chief Steve Belcher on blind faith, if he simply closed his ears to conflicting testimony as a matter of course, or if he had wagered too much on his own fictional account of how “fairly” the law was enforced to cut his losses and run.

Rotkin refused to consider granting amnesty for past sleeping tickets, many of which are his direct responsibility for closing the Coral Street Open Air Shelter. In April, 1996, at the same time Rotkin was lobbying for an injunction against the protesters, San Francisco's District Attorney Terence Hallinan dismissed all Matrix sleepcrime charges and warrants

—more than 38,000 in all. Rotkin has refused to consider an equivalent move in Santa Cruz, even though Santa Cruz's law is worse than San Francisco's.

Local media has stoutly supported Rotkin's mythology and modus operandi. *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reporter Karen Clark has carefully kept the reasonable specifics of protester proposals out of her news stories. Homelessness, the downtown “street problem” and the Sleeping Ban turned out to be the biggest, most controversial issues of the election — and nowhere in Clark's stories was it ever clearly described.

Clark uncritically repeated Rotkin's shotgun charge that demonstrators wanted to sleep outside everywhere and parroted his accusations of “rats, feces, and litter” used to secure the harsh injunction. In fact, no tickets were ever issued for any of these charges, and Rotkin aggravated the situation by keeping the City Hall bathrooms closed at night. The City continues to dither, dally and delay on whether to open up and staff existing parking garage bathrooms at night, while at the same time priding itself on its “continuing investigation” of the problem.

Clark and John Woolfolk of the *San Jose Mercury-News* have likewise declined to cover the basic issue: the absence of legal places to sleep combined with a law that makes sleeping a crime. Nowhere in the stories of Clark and Woolfolk do we read how many homeless