

by **Becky Johnson**

Everyone has seen them. Sometimes they have a sign. Sometimes a cup. Sometimes they just ask outright, "Got any spare change?" They are beggars or panhandlers. And everyone agrees, there are more of them now than there used to be.

Sometimes they are frightening. There are stories of individual panhandlers being too aggressive or rude. Or of people being followed by them when "no" was not good enough. It certainly seems timely to "do something about the problem of panhandlers" in Santa Cruz, especially since the downtown businesses have convinced an avowedly progressive mayor that panhandling is the problem, not poverty.

Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin held a press conference on October 1 to discuss his proposals to combat panhandling. He urged residents and visitors alike to refrain from giving money to beggars in the street, much as people are told not to feed a stray cat to discourage it from hanging about. "Instead, donate to charities which provide services to the homeless," stated Rotkin, who is up for re-election this November. "Most well-intended handouts go to cigarettes, alcohol or drugs..." he charged. Rotkin reasoned that there are so many food programs in Santa Cruz, only a complete idiot could be hungry here. Insult to injury.

Articles that uncritically supported Rotkin's anti-panhandling position appeared in *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The Santa Cruz Sentinel*, *The Metro* and *the City on a Hill Press*.

The fact is, there is a 12.7% unemployment rate in Santa Cruz County, considerably higher than the state average. There are 500 - 1500 homeless people in the City of Santa Cruz alone. Massive cutbacks in social programs such as AFDC, SSI, and General Assistance combined with low wages for the few jobs that do exist, and the spiraling cost of housing, have pressed poor and homeless people between a rock and a hard place.

While many food programs do exist, such as meals at St. Francis, the Free Meal at the Homeless Community Resource Center, Food Not Bombs and Feed The People, all of these programs are faced with cutbacks in both public and

private donations, at the same time they are experiencing greater demands. There are more hungry people on the streets and in some of the homes in Santa Cruz.

Many downtown merchants have complained that panhandlers are driving away paying customers. Mayor Rotkin legitimizes their complaints in spite of a 40% increase in sales on Pacific Avenue, the main downtown shopping area, in the last year alone! For retail sales and restaurants, the past two years have been the best years since the 1989 earthquake. If panhandling is cutting into business, it would be hard to document.

Alternate means to earn money for street people have been severely curtailed. Many make small macramé or bead work for sale on the sidewalk. But police have prevented these small sales as "peddling without a permit". When law-abiding street peddlers went to City Hall to obtain such a permit, they were told no such permit exists. When asked why this is so, Mayor Rotkin cited the high costs merchants pay for their store space. "It's not fair to the store owners," he said, completely disregarding the consequences to the street people who must panhandle to live.

We, as a society, don't seem to be concerned if housed people have money. If they spend it frivolously on *Golf Digest* or martinis, it causes no public comment. Homeless people have the same needs as housed people do. They need clothing,

shoes, blankets, sleeping bags, band-aids, medicine, lip balm, sunscreen, toilet paper, toothpicks, tampons, dental floss, bunion pads, tweezers, antiseptic, mouthwash, shampoo, deodorant, vitamins, as well as food, just to name a few items.

The idea that homeless people "only spend money on alcohol and drugs" is not only false, but abusive. And coming from the authority of a mayor of a major U.S. city, it could have far reaching consequences, all of them bad for the homeless.

A merchant may fear loss of business — even in Santa Cruz, with its 40% increase in downtown retail sales. But how can that imagined fear be balanced against the homeless person's very real crisis state? One is only a potential and the other a grim reality. How can they be equated? One exists here and now; the other involves vague apprehensions about the future.

Aggressive, abusive panhandling, such as making threats, following a person, or raising one's voice can be a frightening experience. In most cases, the panhandler is so hungry or desperate, normal polite relationships have broken down. And if there are increased incidents of aggressive panhandling, the most likely reason is increased desperation caused by cuts in social safety nets, police harassment, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and yes, lack of food.

A hungry person is a desperate person. This resultant want is the direct responsibility

of Adult Protective Services not doing the job they were mandated to do, gaping holes in county support services, lack of federal and state support for the indigent, and in Santa Cruz, the failure of the City Council and of the Citizens Committee for the Homeless to anticipate and meet the needs of their constituency.

Veiled in Rotkin's plea for donations to homeless services is the unspoken fact that private donations have dropped off dramatically for those services to which Mayor Mike is seeking homeless spare change be redirected. He has blamed the 233-day-long City Hall Sleepers' Protest for the lack of donations. He has blamed "self-styled homeless activists". Perhaps he is to blame himself.

In defending the horrendous Sleeping Ban, Rotkin stated that, "The City of Santa Cruz gives \$8.1 million in combined public and private funding for the homeless." Yet protesters continually raised the issue of lack of legal sleeping spaces (much less shelter spaces) in Santa Cruz — 95% of the homeless must illegally sleep in the bushes, in their cars and under bridges. Homeless advocates charged that homeless programs are little more than fund magnets for middle-class salaried positions, buildings, and office supplies with little of the funding actually reaching the persons for which they were intended, i.e. The HOMELESS.

On October 22, 1996, Rotkin's council funded \$600,000 for a 40-person program which may open in nine months, and not a penny for the existing homeless. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to wonder if our \$8.1 million is being spent properly when we only have shelter spaces for 5% of our homeless residents. Perhaps this fact is causing the drop in private donations.

Many religions support the giving of alms. Buddha and Frances of Assisi supported themselves by asking for alms. Giving to the poor is a strong tradition in the Jewish faith and the giving of alms is the third of seven pillars of Islam.

Giving money to a poor person can be a rewarding experience for a very small price. Please use your heart as well as your head in making this judgment. And if you don't give any money, a kind word goes a long way.

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**To Give Is
Human, to
Beg Is a
Crime**