

Santa Cruz City Council Silences the Public, Censors Dissent, Upholds Camping Ban

"To allow no discussion is an absolute tragedy of the democratic process," Vice-Mayor Celia Scott objected

"Earlier today, I'm sad to say, I witnessed the most blatant silencing of the public.

"I am embarrassed by it and upset by it. If you make choices on who you want to hear from and who you don't want to hear from, how do you ever choose other than silencing the repressed, the unimpressed, or those who don't impress you?"

— Katherine Beiers, Santa Cruz City Council

by Becky Johnson

The Santa Cruz City Council adopted a new policy on homelessness at its December 10 meeting: Don't Ask/Don't Tell.

At that session, three city councilmembers proposed a modification of the Santa Cruz Camping Ban Law. Following on the heels of the extreme pressure of the seven-and-a-half month City Hall Sleepers Protest, discussion of these mild proposals would have been the first time that the city council considered the effect of a sleeping ban in relation to the lack of shelter space for the homeless.

But such a discussion was not to be.

Santa Cruz Vice-Mayor Celia Scott introduced the proposal, stating: "The basic thrust of this proposal is to create an exception to the camping ordinance in the case of winter shelter emergency. Winter is the most difficult time for those who do not have shelter." Scott proposed lifting the ban on camping in the event shelter



Left out in the cold in Santa Cruz are the homeless people who will have to endure a long winter without adequate shelter. Art by Robert V. Whaley

space is lacking.

She documented the current severe shortfall in shelter beds by saying that "428 beds countywide, (the number of beds listed in the County Continuum of Care document) is erroneous, so the total

emergency shelter beds is 229."

Scott challenged former Mayor and Councilmember Mike Rotkin's oft-repeated statement that "the City of Santa Cruz spends more money per capita on the homeless than any other city of its size in the nation". She refuted Rotkin's claim with evidence which showed San Francisco spends \$54 per capita on homeless programs, Santa Monica \$16 per capita, and Santa Cruz only \$4 per capita if only city funding is considered.

Scott explained, "The City of Santa Cruz does spend more than any other incorporated city in the county, approximately 2% of the total \$8.1 million, or \$200,000. So while we are doing well, I don't think we are actually out in front across the nation. That is not to demean the services that we provide, but on a per capita expenditure basis we are not spending an unusual amount of money."

Homeless observer Patrick Ring commented with dry wit: "Maybe it was a typo. Rotkin read most per capita spent on the homeless in the country, and it was actually the county!"

Vice-Mayor Scott continued: "The idea is simply to allow council under emergency conditions to claim an exception to the camping ban ordinance. I think of it as a situation wherein we have no room at the inn. It troubles my conscience personally to be giving people tickets for camping when

there would be no shelter in the City of Santa Cruz for them, and I hope our moral compass has not gone so far astray that we cannot think of this in humanitarian terms and recognize that it is creating a possibility in a future emergency to act in a manner which would allow people who have no other options to not be given a ticket if they sleep out of doors."

Following Scott's presentation, Councilmember Katherine Beiers opted to wait to speak on the merits of the proposal until after members of the public had a chance to speak. But this was not to be.

Councilmember (and ex-Mayor) Mike Rotkin responded first by condemning the proposal: "I'm really troubled by the proposal in front of us because I believe it doesn't have any substance. I think we'll be beaten up regularly by Robert Norse and others after we're done with it because it doesn't actually open up a camping area, it doesn't actually solve the difficult question of where that camping area will be..." Then without any further discussion, Rotkin moved to table the motion. It was immediately seconded. A vote was taken, and the council voted 4-3 to table the item. Rotkin had effectively squelched any debate on the camping ban.

Audience members were appalled, and loudly voiced their outrage, shouting "Recall!" and "It makes you look like an idiot, that's why you want to table it!"

"To allow no discussion is an absolute tragedy of the democratic process," Vice-Mayor Scott objected, with loud audience support. "Absolutely!" added Beiers.

"Can we say fascist?" Robert Norse commented.