

Protesters Demand Amnesty for 'Sleepcrimes'

Protesters made their move. They quietly rose wrapped in blankets, entered the sacred City Council rotunda and stood silently behind councilmembers holding up signs that said "Go to Sleep, Go to Jail."

by Robert Norse

Keeping track of the score in the ongoing *Santa Cruz Sleep Deprivation War* can be frustrating and confusing, but find yourself a warm, dry, well-lit spot if you can, and read the latest chapter of the ceaseless struggle to change city law 6.36.010 — the Sleeping Ban sections of the City's Camping Ban, which make sleeping outside or in a vehicle illegal at night.

Initial hopes for legalizing sleep in this city of 50,000 (with 500-1500 homeless and fewer than 250 shelter spaces at night) focused on an unprecedented and tempestuous division in the generally homeless-hostile City Council. At the December 10th council meeting, a preemptive (and apparently prearranged) strike by Councilmember Mike "Reform-Wrecker" Rotkin and Mayor Cynthia Matthews crushed the first substantive discussion on the City's anti-homeless ban.

But minutes after the discussion began, Rotkin butted in with a rarely-used and controversial motion to table it, cutting off the three councilmembers who introduced the proposal — Celia Scott, Katherine

Beiers and Scott Kennedy. That action struck the debate dead, without a word of public hearing or a bit of input from five of the seven-member council. Rotkin's action came on the heels of a misinformation campaign from merchants claiming that the reform proposal would immediately overturn the Sleeping Ban.

Rotkin's rude and roughshod tactics had usually been reserved for silencing homeless speakers. But for the council to muzzle its own elite created an angry rift. Councilmembers Beiers, Scott, and Kennedy reacted with outrage, vacating their chairs, denouncing the council action to the media, and later addressing the council from the people's microphone.

Was the seamless unity of the council against the homeless hordes at last broken? Here, some activists hoped, was suddenly room for leverage. Could left-leaning progressives be mobilized behind the disenfranchised councilmembers to get some real action at last on the Sleeping Ban?

But some activists were skeptical, for Celia Scott's Winter Shelter Emergency proposal didn't actually do anything. There was no finding that the existing emergency was a real one and required a suspension of the Sleeping Ban immediately. No moratorium on past sleepcrime tickets, as San Francisco had done. No new rules protecting the homeless from police seizing blankets and punishing protesters, as they had been doing throughout the year. No opening of a low-income campground, carpark, or homeless hostel

To some, Scott's "reform" proposal



Graphic by Kevin Fuggitt

seemed a token gesture, so the three councilmembers could respond to evictions, welfare cuts, and SSI casualties with a wringing of hands and a pallid, "We tried."

But in spite of their doubts, activists had to admit that Scott's proposal set the stage for a public debate — a debate that had been denied for nearly two decades.

And it was clear that Rotkin and Matthews had consciously stifled that debate. Rotkin, the turncoat "Socialist" whose ideology had no room for poor people presumptuous enough to sleep in their cars, and Matthews, the "Miss Manners" Mayor whose hidebound middle-class blinders caused her more concern for city council decorum than for

acknowledging the elementary arithmetic of anguish: 225 shelter spaces for over 800 homeless and a law against sleeping. Matthews and Rotkin were clearly either idiots or villains here.

So the activists moved to support the reform proposal of Scott, Beiers, and Kennedy — who did not speedily accept their embraces. When asked whether she would reintroduce her tabled resolution, Beiers emphatically said no and added that the whole thing had been a mistake in the first place.

Scott went so far as to write an opinion piece in the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel*