

# 'SitCrimes' in Santa Barbara

by Robert Norse

Santa Barbara took a step backwards on April 22, when it joined Santa Cruz and Palo Alto in setting up an anti-homeless Sitting Ban for upscale downtown State Street. Sitting down on the sidewalk between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. along the plush promenade became a \$100 offense. The rising ladder of penalties prescribed \$200 for the second offense, \$250 for the third, and up to six months and \$1000 fines for further sit-crimes.

City Councilmember Eleanor Langor, a member of the Ordinance Committee which brought the law to the full council on April 15, conceded that no homeless advocates had given testimony nor been called to speak. Like the Sitting Ban recently rushed through in San Jose on the same day, the law appears to be largely a merchant special-interest measure designed to disperse downscale locals.

Mindful of Santa Barbara's past history of militant homeless activism and the prospect of an effective legal challenge, the layabouts-get-lost law only bars sitting within a 13-block area (while San Jose's recent homeless relocation measure removes 66 blocks from the menace of homeless lounging and threatens a six-month jail term for a first offense).

Santa Barbara's new ban is just the

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newest attack in a Matrix of new laws repressing the homeless from Glendale (sleeping ban) to Santa Monica (sitting ban) to Thousand Oaks/Ventura (sleeping ban) to Mountain View (no panhandling in parking lots, on median strips, or from cars). The Santa Barbara law claims the standard rationales — "spiral of deterioration and blight" and pedestrian safety. Unlike similar laws passed in Seattle and Berkeley, the Santa Barbara ban includes

no new homeless services — just increased criminal penalties for innocent behavior in public spaces.

Santa Barbara civil rights attorney Will Hastings argued a classic lawsuit that secured local voting rights for the homeless back in 1985. Commented Hastings on the current Sitting Ban: "This is another chapter of a blueprint for the homeless *Mein Kampf* by the city fathers and mothers and the Chamber of Commerce types." He recalls an early '80s State Street Task Force on the Homeless which recommended rounding up homeless people to put them in contained areas that would be

controlled. Flop houses and shelters would be relocated out of town.

A ludicrous attempt several years ago to round up volunteers to stand near panhandlers and argue with people who wanted to give them money was laughed out of the Santa Barbara City Council. But soon after, it passed the Greeters program — a smiley-faced para-police force designed to hustle unsightly poor people out of sight.

Santa Barbara, Hastings notes, has twice relocated its Latino day labor line. From their traditional jobline spot along downtown Santa Barbara Street near the Department of Employment, the immi-

grants were deported to the east side of town near the homeless rescue mission, and then further pressed out of sight to Garden Street south of the Freeway.

Driving poor people out of sight is arrogantly abusive of their rights and profoundly blights the conscience of the community which permits it. Hardy long-term homeless residents like "Protest" Bob Hansen are expected to challenge the law on the streets. Hansen was recently given three years probation after he staged a brief filibuster at the City Council in support of open public restrooms in the downtown corridor.