

Youth is a Crime in Santa Cruz

by Becky Johnson

The Santa Cruz City Council, which has led the state in anti-homeless ordinances against sitting on the sidewalk, sleeping at night, begging, and even an anti-blanket law, has done it again. On July 8, the council passed a law targeted at youth, including homeless youth: the euphemistically titled Child Protection Curfew.

In what has become a typical anti-democratic style for this so-called progressive/liberal council, public input on the ordinance was engineered to be minimal. While local activists knew a curfew was in the works (an attempt had been made in 1994, and Santa Cruz Police Chief Steven Belcher has been pushing for one ever since), the Public Safety Subcommittee drafted the ordinance with no public input. Notice to the public was given less than 24 hours before the council approved the law on its first reading. Even Vice Mayor Celia Scott complained at the way the curfew "was sprung on us."

At a Youth Speak-Out held in June, teens unanimously spoke out against the curfew. Yet few of these teens even knew the ordinance was up for a vote until after the fact. The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* refused to print teen letters opposing the curfew and ignored the major issues in the controversy such as the vagueness of how the curfew would be implemented, the lack of statistics about how the County curfew was working, and the fact that other major cities like Oakland and San Francisco had rejected a youth curfew, choosing to put their money into daytime youth services.

Proponents of the curfew were alerted though. Letters of support were received as early as July 3, while the general public did not know about the curfew until July 7, the day before it was passed by a 6-1

council vote. A total of eight individuals whose power, authority, and future job security would be enhanced if the curfew passed, testified to the need.

Downtown Association merchants, notorious for anti-homeless, anti-counter-culture, and anti-youth policies testified in favor of the ordinance. Repeated again and again was the need "to give the police another tool to deal with youth." In the last year, teens downtown have bitterly

demonstrator had confronted Mayor Cynthia Matthews, a downtown merchant and curfew supporter, with a sign: "Can't Just Send the Homeless Teens Home!" Matthews' response was an icy glare.

Above The Line's promised homeless youth shelter has not yet opened. Even when it is operational, its success depends on it being a voluntary organization. Its permit, in fact, prohibits court commitments. Slated to open with 20 people, it

While money has been earmarked for a badly needed teen center, it will be years before it opens. No youth detention centers exist, and Juvenile Hall on Graham Hill Road is overcrowded, unsanitary, and populated with juvenile delinquents who have committed real crimes such as drug offenses, battery, and even murder. While it is a supervised facility, it is hardly an environment which "protects children."

County Health Officer George Wolfe said, "Teen curfews are one strategy to try to reach out to youth before their problems become so serious that detention is the only response left in the criminal justice system." Rephrased, this means: let's detain all youth now lest we be forced to detain some of them later on.

How can a 1 a.m. phone call from a police officer ordering me to pick up my son or daughter possibly improve my family relationships? This is right-wing morality stamped on the general public by those who are not imaginative enough to think of a good reason for a teen to be outdoors after 11 p.m. It is supported by parents whose own efforts at controlling their teens have been ineffective.

Are children really protected by a curfew? Don't adults prey on young people 24 hours a day (not just during curfew hours) and indoors as well as outdoors? What about youth who live in homes where their parents fight? Or where an abusive adult is on a rampage? Isn't it safer to stay out late and come home after the drunk has passed out for the night?

Families packed into tight quarters in a hard housing market experience increased friction between youth and parents. Teenagers leaving home and just being somewhere else, is a natural escape valve and knows no clock.

As for the homeless teens? In Santa Cruz tonight, there is no answer.



Art by Christa Occhiogrosso

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complained that police use laws barring skateboarding, jaywalking, leaning against a planter, dogs on Pacific Avenue, underage possession of tobacco, and whatever else they can find to harass, ID, and photograph minors. Now, after 11 p.m., youth itself is a crime in Santa Cruz.

Missing from any council debate was the unsolvable question of what can be done with homeless youth. Earlier a lone

will be full the first day.

Bob Taren of the ACLU spoke against the curfew. Curfew opponents raised several objections. No provision allows parents to give permission to their young adults to be out after curfew, or to designate another responsible adult to supervise their youth. No new services are offered to teens — only infractions, misdemeanors, and incarceration.