

Salinas Bans Begging in the Name of Steinbeck

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homeless with a sledgehammer."

A merchant objected to being called anti-homeless. "We should help the poor," he testified. "We should watch out for them. We cannot freeload in this society. There's no free rides. If you know anything about our old town, Salinas, you know there are a lot of vacancies. People are trying to make a living.

"I have a business in the 100 Block of Old Town Salinas. I am not a wealthy person. I could become homeless. We give regularly to charity. Panhandling to them is their job. Their nine to five is on the street. You say 25% of the homeless have jobs? It's that other 75% who are willing to sit there, drunk out of their minds, and we have to deal with them. All we are trying to do is give a tool to the police if someone is aggressive or down-right offensive. There are places they can get all these things that they need. They got shelter, they have food, clothing. They're taken care of in this city."

The lone councilmember opposed to the ban was Juan Oliveras, who had voted for the law on the first reading, but was swayed to oppose it by arguments against the criminalization of homelessness.

In casting his dissenting vote, Oliveras said, "I thought I might be able to support the time of the solicitation. I'm not sure everyone is afraid after dark. My real problem is the criminalization of poverty. I have a real problem that poor people are going to be limited in a way that no one else will be limited. We can ask for

money anytime we want and no one is going to accuse us of anything.

"I think again we read and we see so much about the poor and the homeless that we all say, let's go and serve at Dorthee's Kitchen, but only as long as they stay over there and don't come anywhere near us. And let me tell you another thing that bothers me is also the idea that somehow, the Steinbeck Foundation and the Old Town Association, that we are going to treat people in a different way, again the poor, if they are doing something wrong, in accosting or aggressive behavior."

'THE POOR WILL ALWAYS BE WITH US'

"I don't think we're criminalizing poverty," said Councilmember Anna Caballero as she moved to adopt the ordinance. Councilmember Jan Collins, who seconded it, reported five to 15 complaints per day of aggressive solicitation. Collins, in attempting to define the scope of the problem, said: "It isn't just Old Town Salinas, we will always have homeless and poor people among us."

Also speaking in favor of the ban on begging, Councilmember Robert Ocampo left no doubt as to who the law benefited:

"I do think we owe this to the downtown. Downtown has been struggling, business going to the mall, business going to the east side. I think we've done a lot in terms of the Steinbeck Center, in terms of trying to make the downtown a little better. I do think we owe it to the downtown to try to support them. And I think this measure is something that will help them. And help the businesses do better."

He said it is better to donate to the Salvation Army and the United Way, adding, "I don't think anyone on the council is against the homeless."

OLIVERAS DEFENDS THE POOR

Juan Oliveras took a different tact. "My sense is it is about people being uncomfortable," he said. "And we're going to make them comfortable when they go downtown so they won't see poor people. I go to San Francisco and we see poor people and homeless people, and millions and millions of people from all over the world continue to go to San Francisco regardless of the homeless, regardless of the panhandlers, and it doesn't scare them away."

Oliveras then described the impact of the anti-begging law in human terms: "They can't ask for money after dark when they're the hungriest, probably, when they are the neediest, probably. Some of us call ourselves Christian — this isn't Christian."

After the ordinance passed on a 6-1 vote, Oliveras commented on the irony of a center named for John Steinbeck becoming the impetus for a law to ban beggars in the vicinity.

"They don't know the history in that sense," Oliveras said. "They only know a different kind of history, that Steinbeck was a famous man, that he won the Pulitzer prize for literature. Steinbeck's most important work was the *Grapes of Wrath*, which was about poor people, and *Cannery Row*. From that point of view it is a contradiction."