

Scapegoat City, California

Vigil at Santa Monica City Hall challenges a city's neglect and persecution of the unhoused



Left, the Santa Monica police roust homeless people sleeping out at City Hall. An officer evicts a homeless woman with only one blanket to her name.

Right, there will be no rest for the weary tonight, as a police officer pulls the sleeping bag off a homeless person and orders him out into the driving rain.



We were pushed to the curb, like the recyclables and the trash that the City thinks we are... The police came at 4 a.m. and forced us back into the pouring rain. We were really shocked by that.” — Jennafer Waggoner, protest organizer

by Becky Johnson

Santa Monica demonstrators, inspired by San Diego's turbulent and well-attended homeless protest to the south, began a vigil of their own at City Hall on May 8, seeking shelter from heavy rains, police harassment, and city neglect.

A dramatic history lies behind this protest. In 1994, Memorial Park in Santa Monica was a haven for homeless people. A five-month homeless protest at City Hall had been ended through a series of negotiations between the City Council and the protesters. A deal was struck: If the homeless protesters would leave City Hall, they could stay in Memorial Park.

But when right-wing politicians used the specter of drug use and “undesirable elements” to float an initiative to ban camping and sleeping, the City Council — fearful of losing the '94 elections — closed the park at night and made sleeping illegal in the rest of the city as well. Even though they pandered to fear and prejudice, the liberals still lost their majority on the council.

Fast forward to 1998. Santa Monica City Councilmember Michael Feinstein is still worried that the new protest by activist Jennafer Waggoner and her rain-soaked crew could throw a monkey wrench into his political plans.

“The conservatives used our being kind to the homeless to gain a majority on City

what Jennafer Waggoner and the protesters are doing is that we have a chance to win back a seat lost to conservatives in 1994, and the protest could ruin our chances.”

“Whatever deal you make with the City, expect it to be broken,” commented homeless activist and one-time City Council candidate Ron Taylor, who later became the subject of a notable film by Richard Cohen, *Taylor's Campaign*.

“In that case, during the negotiations two (24-hour) bathrooms were opened, one in Memorial Park and one in Lincoln Park. Both closed when the City Council voted to close all the parks at night early in 1996. And if Jennafer and the homeless

protest cost them a seat on City Council, then good. They deserve to lose the seat.”

A group of 40 homeless people and advocates began the 24-hour vigil at Santa Monica City Hall on May 8, and have sustained it through driving rains and police opposition. The demonstrators are taking direct action and challenging city officials over the lack of emergency shelter space and a law which makes it illegal to sleep at night. Demands include year-round shelters and guarantees that no elderly or disabled person on Section 8 will be displaced from their dwellings.