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San Jose Food Not Bombs Declares That Parks Are for All the People

by Becky Johnson & Robert Norse

San Jose activists continue to press for the right of homeless people to frequent St. James Park. For the homeless people of San Jose who have little chance of finding housing, simply being allowed to be in public spaces is becoming more and more impossible.

In a city of 840,000, with up to 20,000 people without a place to sleep on any given night of the year, shelter space is grossly inadequate. Sandy Perry of the Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) said, "San Jose has the highest housing costs in the country. Yet despite a \$293 million redevelopment budget surplus, it claims it cannot afford to invest more than the legal minimum in low-cost housing."

San Jose, under Mayor Susan Hammer, passed a law in 1997 which prohibits sitting down on the sidewalk under threat of misdemeanor arrest in a 66-block area of the downtown, leaving only the city parks as refuges for homeless people [see *Street Spirit*, May, 1997]. The Downtown Association now plans to gentrify St. James Park with a variety of affluent pastimes [*Street Spirit*, June, 1998]; and the police are targeting the neighborhood poor and the homeless, i.e., the traditional community that uses the park.

NEWSPAPER SMEARS THE HOMELESS

As in San Francisco last fall, the merchant/police attack first began with a series of anti-homeless newspaper articles. The *San Jose Mercury News* luridly headlined St. James Park as "a haven for junkies" and home of "bus-stop stabbings."

Next, a phony residents' association — actually a police-backed creation called Take Back the Park — denounces "junkies, winos and bums" to paint the park as a center of crime and disorder requiring the police sweeps. The Horace Mann Association, acting as a business/police front group, then spends \$100,000 for an architect in a homeless-hostile redevelopment plan.

"Families have been using the park the whole time," said Adam Welsh of San Jose Food Not Bombs (SJFNB). When asked about reports of hypodermic needles found in the park, his voice rose sharply. "That is a total outright lie! When an organizer wanted to plan an Easter egg hunt in St. James Park, the police told him to search the park with a metal detector looking for hypodermic

needles. There were no needles."

At the "Music in the Other Park" festival on June 25, SJFNB fed people and circulated a flier, "Downtown is for Everyone," accusing the Horace Mann Association of planning to "resettle" St. James Park with "upscale residents." Residents who "keep up with the Jones" will be considered good guys, fully enfranchised into the privileges of citizenship, while those who fall behind shall increasingly become suspect and barred from civic space as undesirables.

FOOD NOT BOMBS FIGHTS BACK

The June 25th festival was sponsored, in part, by the City of San Jose. A Downtown Association dignitary darted in front of TV cameras insisting SJFNB's feedings were not needed and a health hazard. SJFNB activists marched through the crowd with signs saying: "Humans Aren't Commodities;" "Free Mama Faye — POW of St. James Park;" and "Victor Duran Was Beaten to Death by San Jose Cops."

Police officers on horseback, on bicycles, and on foot clustered near the food tables and shadowed the marchers. In response, young protesters turned the SJPD operation around by rushing in with placards for guerrilla photo-ops, using their own video camera. After one FNBER draped a sign saying, "No Respect for Killer Cops or Their Cover-up Partners," in front of the milling crowd of cops, San Jose's finest hastily dispersed.

A few minutes later, the police took issue with a crude cardboard sign hung on the Robert F. Kennedy monument, declaring: "No Redevelopment of St. James Park — no pig hype — Back Off!" Previously ignored, the sign became the center of attention as officers stalked about looking for suspects.

"You can't place a sign on a monument," one officer explained to a skeptical man nearby. "The First Amendment does not apply to monuments!" Street Spirit's Robert Norse loudly announced to the passersby. Unable to find the criminal sign-placer, the officers took the sign itself into custody. "Give it to the mayor!" offered Wolf of CHAM. "Give it to the governor," he called out as six San Jose police officers confiscated the offending cardboard and escorted it out of the park.

For more information: San Jose FNB (408) 973-1031; CHAM (408) 345-2353.