

SANTA CRUZ WRESTLES WITH ITS CONSCIENCE

City Council contemplates softening its Draconian camping ban

by Becky Johnson

Sleep has been a crime in Santa Cruz for 20 years. On January 25, Loudon Nelson Community Center was the site of a large public forum on reforming the Santa Cruz Camping Ordinance. Mayor Katherine Beiers, who introduced the item to the Santa Cruz City Council on December 8, is a member of the task force to review the camping ban and propose changes, if any, to the entire council in February.

Activists in Santa Cruz have been asking the City Council to address the human rights issues involved for years, and after last November's elections, had some hope that the new council might be more progressive. But several signs along the way have caused confusion, alarm, and in some cases, disgust — notably because major business interests have been over-represented in the City Council task force meetings to review the camping ban, and common myths about homeless people have gone unchecked.

The task force meetings have been heavily weighted towards groups hostile to the homeless — the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Business Association, and the Harvey West Association. The council met with the Downtown Neighborhood Association (which urges no change in the current anti-homeless law), and then with county staff, the police, and social service providers. No homeless person or advocate was on the task force, but two police officers, sometimes in uniform, attended all meetings.

Only once did the City Council's task force meet with homeless people. And when they did spare exactly one hour to meet with the only people truly affected by this law, Mayor Beiers was absent.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Then, at the January 25th public hearing, 60 speakers addressed the City Councilmembers who make up the task force: Krohn, Sugar, and Beiers. The



Santa Cruz activists have held countless protests to overturn the sleeping ban.

“I was so glad I was warm and have a warm place to sleep. I was sad to think that anyone should have to sleep outside if they didn't want to. But then to not be allowed to sleep outside is appalling.” — Bakery owner Emily Reilly, describing the recent cold spell

overwhelming majority of speakers denounced the ban on sleeping and camping; only four favored retaining the ban. Fred Geiger, a union activist and resident of Santa Cruz for 25 years, told the council: “I don't think it serves the city, taxpayers or residents to have the police beating the bushes, searching with dogs and horses to prevent people from sleeping. When winter's over and the armory is shut down, it will basically be illegal to not have a residence.”

William Rubel opposed any change in the ordinance. He claimed that his neighborhood was impacted by transients, which had culminated in a man being shot three years earlier. “People who are sleeping not just in the bushes tend to park

their cars in our neighborhood first,” he said. “We often have problems with people defecating in our front yards, littering, and it provides the kind of covering and commotion that drug dealers use.”

Green Party member David Silva charged: “It's not an ordinance about camping. It's an ordinance about homeless people. It is operating to criminalize homeless people. You cannot help falling asleep at night.”

A homeless veteran told of how sleep deprivation hurts: “If you don't get enough sleep you become angry. Then you become violent. People need places to sleep.” Tirith, who works with Feed the People and lives in a bus with her brother Sunrise, waved a yellow slip of papers. “I