

When it comes to making policies affecting homeless people, there is a school of thought that goes like this: "If we provide services for homeless people, all the homeless everywhere will flock to our city and inundate those services." Conclusion: Do nothing.

Another position that is espoused all too often by Santa Cruz officials is this: "We already provide more services for the homeless than any other comparable size city." This is offered as a defense for allowing an unmet need to exist under our very noses. Conclusion: Do little.

Being well intended is not enough. In Santa Cruz, City Councilmembers Celia Scott, Katherine Beiers, and Scott Kennedy embarked on a quest to find a new site to replace the Coral Street Open Air Shelter, a homeless campground which was the only legal refuge from Santa Cruz's sleeping ban until city officials closed it last year, displacing over 200 homeless persons. Conclusion: No suitable site was found.

The Coral Street Open Air Shelter was closed to make way for Community House, a transitional housing project for 20-40 people which is scheduled to be built by the Citizens Committee for the Homeless (CCH) at a cost of \$2 million on the site of the former campground.

But laborious red tape, ever more inflated funding requirements, the irregularities of meeting criteria for federal government grants, and inclement weather have combined to put off the start of Community House until next spring at the earliest.

This site is one-third of an acre, bounded on one side by a freeway, on another by a railroad track, and on a third by heavy industry. It is the only site that could be opened as early as tomorrow for a homeless campground.

In a city that makes all outdoor sleeping illegal, the Coral Street Open Air Shelter got an official permit from the city in 1994. It was abruptly closed in



December, 1995, over the protests of dozens of homeless campers who had formed Save Our Shelters, built weatherized tents, and secured commitments from the property owners — which were blithely violated when the first winter storm hit.

Why does Santa Cruz need a homeless campground? The answer is threefold. It's fast, it's cheap, and it fits the needs of homeless people.

Fast: A campground can be set up and operating within a few days. Tents can be set up and taken down in a matter of minutes. In Santa Cruz, we live in earthquake country, and building codes must of necessity be very strict and usually costly. But

tents, while providing shelter from wet weather, pose no hazard in an earthquake.

Cheap: A campground at Coral Street could be opened for the cost of port-potties and security. Wood chips on the ground and wooden palletes under the tents could keep campers high and dry all winter long. Winter is when a homeless campground is most needed as a protective shield from cold, dark and wet weather. Warmer, dryer weather allows many more sleeping possibilities for those forced to sleep out of doors.

Fits the needs of homeless people: Homeless people most often lack three essential things — a place in which to

As for the people sleeping under houses and bridges, in cars and cardboard boxes, a legal, safe campground can only be found in their illegal dreams — outlawed by the Santa Cruz sleeping ban.



organize their belongings and to sleep, security from assault and from the police; and companionship or sense of community. A campground solves all three.

Earlier this year, on the impetus of Scott Kennedy, a proposal was drawn up for a "Safe Haven" program. It was hoped that Holy Cross Catholic Church could provide the site for homeless people to sleep on the field at night with access to bathrooms and with security. But Holy Cross was unworkable and unavailable. Further, the proposed \$200,000 per year for 200 people proved too costly for either the City Council or CCH, and no further action was taken.

On November 21, 1996, CCH met. As a member of the board, I proposed the reopening of the Coral Street Open Air Shelter as an emergency winter campground. I cited the recent rash of homeless deaths in Santa Cruz (10 in the last three weeks), and the unmet need of homeless people for shelter, even with both the armory and the Interfaith Satellite Shelter at maximum occupancy. I cited the cuts in the Food Stamp program, AFDC, benefits to legal and illegal immigrants, GA and SSI, all of which combine to create an even greater need for services.

I cited the stated support for a well-managed campground if a site could be found by five city councilmembers (Beiers, Kennedy, Scott, Rotkin and Hernandez). I reported that the homeless people I have talked to say the service they need the most is a legal campground.

At first, Paul Lee, Chair of the CCH, suggested we take up the campground proposal in executive committee. Almost immediately, Dr. Alan Bayer, MD and Vice Chair, moved to table any discussion indefinitely. It was seconded by James Lapp, minister of St. Stephens Lutheran Church in Soquel. A vote was taken with no discussion. Many abstained and I was the lone vote opposed. Community House Director Frank Pucelik, who wished to speak on the idea's merits, was effectively

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FOR THE POOR, A CAMPGROUND IS AN ILLEGAL DREAM