

DEBUNKING the MAGNET THEORY

Politicians have practiced fear-mongering for years to prevent homeless services from gaining public support. The magnet theory neatly solves any mayor's dilemma of how to pay for such services. By preaching in dire tones of the horrors of "10 million homeless people" moving to *(insert your city here)* tomorrow, politicians can sway voters away from natural humanitarian inclinations.

by Becky Johnson

During hundreds of debates, task forces, and City Council meetings across our nation, concerned citizens discuss what to do about the homeless problem. When advocates suggest the obvious temporary and permanent solutions, someone will stand up and say the following: "If we *(insert any of the following)* build a shelter, campground, carpark, start a feeding program, health care clinic, or decriminalize sleeping, sitting, or asking for spare change — then hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of homeless people from all over the nation will flock here."

County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt told Homeless United for Friendship & Freedom (HUFF) in the summer of 1998 that, "If we could only build a wall and surround Santa Cruz, we could solve our local homeless problem. But alas..."

Robert DeFreitas, a member of the Downtown Neighborhood Association, in an editorial to the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel*, wrote of the "deluge of homeless, impacting (his) fragile neighborhood," if we should allow the homeless to sleep at night. Never mind that we had never considered legalizing sleeping in his neighborhood. All these proponents of anti-homeless policies are giving credence to what is called the magnet theory, where cities become a "magnet" attracting homeless people from all over.

Last winter, Santa Cruz Mayor Katherine Beiers set up a task force to reconsider the camping ordinance, and to make recommendations to the full City Council. Many hoped the sleeping ban would be ended or at least modified.

At the council meeting on February 23, Councilmember Mike Rotkin, who enjoys a somewhat liberal reputation due to his day job as a lecturer at the University of



Santa Cruz protester's simple, poignant message.

Alene Smith photo

California at Santa Cruz, spoke again of the dire results of legalizing sleeping in the industrial zones of the city: "The question is: does either creating a campground or sending the message out there that we're going to let people sleep outside in our town" attract homeless people to our area.

Rotkin predicted that if Santa Cruz were to legalize sleeping, "We're either going to have an ordinance which is unenforceable, or to take a milder position, less enforceable than it currently is, and it will have a magnet effect."

Mayor Beiers disagreed, saying, "We did quite a bit of research on the magnet theory." Then Beiers read from a study done by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty: "A number of studies refute the notion of a magnet effect. Research on the geographic patterns of homeless people does not support the claim that homeless people tend to travel from one city or town to another to

take advantage of shelters or services. In fact, the research tends to indicate homeless people are not as mobile as is commonly thought."

Then Beiers added, "We also got some statements and letters from Florida and Eugene, Oregon, who have gone further than us in liberalizing camping and they did not experience any magnet effect."

Mayor Beiers was referring to letters, faxes, and e-mails which researchers at HUFF had arranged to be sent to the City Council. HUFF determined that there have been at least four instances in recent history in which a city has changed a law banning sleeping into some sort of legalized situation. In 1986, the City of Santa Barbara legalized sleeping for three years. After the 1992 *Pottinger* decision, the City of Miami set up safe zones where homeless people could sleep. Further north, Ft. Lauderdale, fearing a court suit, set up its own safe zone. In 1997, Eugene, Oregon, legalized sleeping in vehicles in the industrial area of town.

After contacting service providers, social service departments, and city managers in these four cities, HUFF found the results to be the same: In no city, after sleeping was legalized, did a measurable increase in homeless people using homeless services occur.

In Eugene, Tom Musslewhite, executive director of Project Recovery reported, "The first noticeable effect of the change in the law was a migration of vehicular dwellers out of the neighborhoods to the industrial areas in which sleeping had been legalized."

In both cities in Florida, after five years of safe zones in effect, social service providers reported no increase in home-