

Debunking the Magnet Theory

from page two

less people in the area. They did note an increase in funding for homeless services during that time period which they attributed to the higher visibility of homeless suffering. No backlash against homeless people was observed in either city.

Politicians have practiced fear-mongering for years to prevent homeless shelters and services from gaining public support. Indeed, the magnet theory neatly solves any mayor's dilemma of how to pay for homeless services, which will generate no revenue for the city but are badly needed. By preaching in dire tones the horrors of "10 million homeless people," as Mike Rotkin has said, moving to (*insert your city here*) tomorrow, politicians can sway their constituency away from their natural humanitarian inclinations.

"It's an easy way to cop out," said Ken Cole of the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz. "In my 13 years as a social service provider in Seattle, I never had the experience of someone new coming to our city to sleep on a mat on the floor or to stand in line for food."

At the National Summit on Homelessness held in May, 1999, by the

National Coalition for the Homeless, Judy Appel, a civil rights attorney with the S.F. Coalition on Homelessness, asked for a show of hands from those whose city has been portrayed by politicians and the media as a "magnet." Nearly every hand in the room was raised.

The following cities all claim they are "magnets" for homeless people:

Akron, OH; Alexandria, LA; Asheville, NC; Atlanta, GA; Austin, TX; Baton Rouge, LA; Berkeley, CA; Chapel Hill, NC; Charlotte, NC; Cincinnati, OH; Denver, CO; Durham, NC; Fairfax Co., VA; Greensboro, NC; High Point, NC; Jacksonville, FL; Jefferson, IN; Lafayette, LA; Lake Charles, LA; New Orleans, LA; New York, NY; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Pittsburgh, PA; Portland, PA; Portsmouth, NH; Raleigh, NC; Reno, NV; San Francisco, CA; Shreveport, LA; Tucson, AZ; Washington, DC; Wheaton, IL; Winston Salem, NC.

Paul Boden, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness added, "And there are five cities — Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco, New York, and Tucson — that all claim they are the biggest magnet."

Ken Cole offered a new insight into the issue by pointing out that the concentra-

tion of jobs and services in urban areas are what draws homeless and non-homeless people alike. "*Cities* are magnets for the homeless," Cole said. "They have centralized transportation and employment. When homeless people come to a new city it's always to seek a job."

Maryanne Gleason, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, also described a less-known homeless magnet phenomenon: "Even slot machines in Reno are a magnet for homeless people. They come to gamble and end up stuck there." Activists do concede that when severe repression hits other areas, social service providers do note a temporary rise in homeless refugees.

Homeless activist Ray Glock-Grueneich described an unintended effect of anti-homeless camping ban laws. "As I was working with homeless people in our court system," he said, "I heard time and time again this story: I was passing through Santa Cruz on my way somewhere else and I got a ticket for sleeping. Now I must stay here for a month or more to go to my court dates."

Santa Cruz City Councilmember Keith Sugar debunked Rotkin's claim of a magnet effect. "Very early on in the some 20 meetings we had, I put out an impassioned plea for some sort of empirical evi-

dence, or even anecdotal evidence of a magnet effect," Sugar said. "In all this time, there has been nothing submitted.

"There is simply nothing out there, ladies and gentlemen, to suggest there is any validity to the magnet effect. We are talking about letting people sleep. If people are not drawn here for food and services, they're surely not going to be drawn here for the privilege to be able to sleep in the cold with a blanket or sleeping bag. The concern is very legitimate, and I don't want to downplay that because it is widely held. I do want to belay those concerns."

Despite the efforts by Beiers and Sugar to show that no evidence exists to support the magnet theory, they joined the rest of the City Council to re-establish the sleeping ban by a 7-0 vote.

The cherished myth of the "hobo phone line" — where a mythical grapevine sends out the word that a city is "easy" on those who must live outdoors and so prompts everyone in the country to come to town — is still believed by influential conservative merchants and their political proxies, despite the evidence.

Santa Cruz homeless activist David Silva challenged all those in power: "Why not design a model to cope with homelessness, so our city can become a beacon, not a magnet?"