

Homeless Issues Task Force Recommends Repeal of Camping Ban in Santa Cruz

by Lucy Kemnitzer

Six months after the Santa Cruz City Council decided to convene a group to investigate and propose policies for the homeless, the Homeless Issues Force Task Force finally has a full complement of members as of the October 18th meeting.

The Task Force has been in operation since the beginning of August, and is supposed to have a six-month run of operations. The intent is hard to divine: many observers have been expressing doubt that the Task Force is intended to actually solve anything, given the city's history of convening task forces to discuss homeless issues, with no result on the main issues.

But the members of this current Task Force are devoted to make real things happen. The Task Force's first real act, in September, was to vote to urge the City Council to repeal the camping ban ordinance, as an emergency measure, since the current law criminalizes the act of sleep and any preparations for sleep, and since winter is coming on and there are not enough spaces in winter shelter, and violence against the homeless has apparently been increasing this year.

This was a potentially dangerous move, internally, for the Task Force, as it challenged the members to go against the wishes of some powerful sections of the community, including the Downtown Association, some neighborhood groups, and law enforcement agencies. But while the motion to make the recommendation did not pass unanimously, the final wording of the letter to the City Council did.

More than two meetings after the letter was sent to the City Council, the item is still not on the council agenda, and there is speculation that the recommendation will never be made part of the regular agenda. If this happens, the Santa Cruz City Council can avoid considering the recommendation as an action item, and thereby avoid the controversy that would develop out of it. But it remains to be seen whether the council will try to ignore this first recommendation of the Task Force or finally face up to the crux of homeless policy in Santa Cruz.

Much of the work of the Task Force is information gathering. And much of the information it sets out to gather is not easy to come by. Government agencies don't keep systematic records about many things that pertain to the homeless.

The Santa Cruz City Council lowered the fines for camping in April. But in October, the County Court was still giving out the higher fines. The Task Force asked how many people had paid the higher fines after the lower ones went into effect. Nobody knows. Nobody knows how many warrants have been issued for failure to appear in court for camping tickets, or for failure to pay camping fines. Nobody knows how many homeless people are assaulted in crimes targeted at them for their status.

Along with discovering that the camping fines had not been lowered in the courts although they were lowered in the code, the Task Force has discovered that the community service option is not readily available to the homeless, who presumably need it more than other people.

The rules for community service in Santa Cruz restrict it to fines of over \$100, and require that the person pay a \$50 fee in addition to the fine to be admitted into the program (the homeless can get a voucher for \$25 from the Homeless Services Center). This means that a person must rack up at least two camping tickets before he or she is eligible for community service. And then, community service work is only credited at five dollars an hour, so that the minimum community service sentence is 20 hours. However, while lowering the camping fines, the City Council also added to the ordinance the stipulation that camping ban violations were to be given no more than eight hours of community service. This leaves the City Ordinance and the county procedures in conflict.

There are things we do already know about homeless people in Santa Cruz. We know that a national study decided that a person would need to make over \$18 an hour to afford Santa Cruz rents, while local wages run lower than average. We know that Santa Cruz runs a very low rate of available places to live, even if they were available at affordable rents. A recommendation for affordable rent is in the works, as well as various recommendations for safe places for the homeless to sleep.

According to the original plan, the Task Force has four more months to go. In January, the Task Force should present its findings to the City Council, and the council will have to decide whether to move on those findings or not. By then, the winter will be half over. It remains to be seen what will happen after that.