

Sleeping Ban Protest Prompts Mayor and Council to Walk Out

Sleeping is outlawed in the city, so more than 20 people, many clad in blankets, lay down on the floor and turned the council chambers into a last-ditch sanctuary.

by Becky Johnson

On March 28, protesters came to the Santa Cruz City Council to speak out against the draconian Sleeping Ban and the increasing harassment and suffering of homeless people. About 100 people showed up to demonstrate against the City Council's unwillingness to decriminalize sleeping at night despite the closing of the largest shelter in Santa Cruz County on April 1.

"The homeless have waited long enough for a good night's sleep," said Robert Norse of HUFF (Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom). The City's Homeless Issues Task Force has unanimously called for "suspension of ticketing under the Sleeping Ban pending the establishment of Safe Zones for the homeless."

Santa Cruz Police Chief Steve Belcher

documented 51 reported assaults against homeless people in 1999. The Homeless Services Center, the Santa Cruz County Coroner, and HUFF documented 19 homeless deaths in 1999. Sleeping Ban activist and AIDS sufferer David Silva is in day 28 of his fast to end the Sleeping Ban. Yet no new shelter has opened for homeless people since July, 1998.

Protester James Nay, speaking to the City Council from the public microphone, asked Mayor Keith Sugar, "Will you vote now to place the Sleeping Ban on the agenda tonight as an emergency resolution?" Mayor Sugar remained silent.

Trying to force the recalcitrant mayor and council to respond to their demands to end the Sleeping Ban, more than 20 people, many clad in blankets, lay down on the floor in front of the podium, a visual statement to the council that since sleeping was outlawed everywhere else in the city, the council should itself become a last-ditch sanctuary. In response, Sugar recessed the meeting. SCAN Housing and Homelessness Subcommittee Chair Tom Shaver joined those lying on the floor.

Presenters for the Living Wage Ordinance sought to have access to the podium so Mayor Sugar could reconvene

the meeting and have the City Council consider an ordinance which would require the City to pay its own workers more. Protesters moved aside and urged the speakers to take the podium and proceed with the meeting. But instead, Mayor Sugar permanently recessed the meeting and the entire council vacated the chambers.

For the next hour and a half, under the watchful eye of Police Sgt. Vogel and Officer Brandt, protesters and community members listened to a presentation by Sandy Brown and Bob Fitch of the Coalition for a Living Wage, followed by a question-and-answer period. Fitch detailed that the City of Santa Cruz employs 388 temporary positions, which involve ongoing work at an average wage of \$8.68 an hour. The Coalition is recommending \$13 an hour for employees who also receive medical insurance, and \$14 an hour for those who don't.

Despite the abrupt closure of the council meeting, which prevented the Coalition for a Living Wage from presenting their proposal to form a Living Wage Task Force, Coalition members graciously expressed solidarity with the Sleeping Ban protesters.

"Santa Cruz has the second highest cost of housing in the nation," a Coalition mem-

ber told *Street Spirit*. "All the people in the Coalition believe homeless people should be provided safe spots and the right to sleep at night. We believe that having a roof over your head and having a way to make a living are basic human rights."

Following the informal presentation on the Living Wage Ordinance, the protesters then discussed the Sleeping Ban and what tactics should next be employed to end the anti-homeless law against sleeping and covering up with blankets. No arrests were made and no pies tossed.