

# Smoke, Mirrors and Texas Instruments

Santa Cruz City Council caves in to merchants' pressure and sells out the homeless again

by Becky Johnson & Robert Norse

On June 28, the Santa Cruz City Council struck down the safe sleeping zone proposal it had passed by a 4-2 vote a month earlier. Without presenting any specific documentation for the change of heart, Councilmember Katherine Beiers forced the 5-2 vote criminalizing sleep throughout Santa Cruz for homeless people, and declared her opposition to having the issue placed on the ballot for voter approval.

Homeless activists urged the City Council to place portapotties and dumpsters in heavily used zones and expand tolerance for sleeping citywide when no other laws are being broken. They also denounced what they called "police sabotage" of the safe sleeping zone proposal.

Mayor Keith Sugar expelled, barred and ordered the arrest of Robert Norse after Norse criticized Sugar's repeated interruptions of the closing speech of a homeless advocate at the council session. Sugar was also charged by activists with running a closed decision-making process and Brown Act violations.

Following the City Council's vote last month on a first reading of the measure to establish safe sleeping zones in two industrial areas of Santa Cruz, several things hit the fan at once. A conservative business leader sent a phony press release to the *San Francisco Chronicle* announcing that the council had repealed the entire camping ban; that sounded newsworthy, but was highly inaccurate. Not only was the camping ban entirely intact, the proposed ordinance required a second reading.

Many vehicularly housed residents moved from other locations in Santa Cruz to the industrial areas with the mistaken notion that sleeping at night in a vehicle was now allowed in those areas. At the



Alene Smith photo

**The City Council just re-criminalized sleep for this homeless woman in Santa Cruz.**

same time, school let out, and Santa Cruz was, as it always is in May and June, the destination for many vacationers with RVs and motor homes. Also, while the need for portapotties and dumpsters for trash was expressed to the City Council, nothing happened.

One more piece of misinformation was transmitted. Westside residents who spoke to police officers were told that the police had been directed by the City Council to not write any citations at all — including for littering, defecating, urinating, or disturbing the peace — not just for sleeping. "That's not true!" said Councilmember Tim Fitzmaurice. "The City Council gave no such direction to the police."

According to the *Santa Cruz County Sentinel*, an "avalanche of e-mails, faxes, and letters" caused Councilmembers Katherine Beiers and Tim Fitzmaurice to back off from their previous support for safe zones in a city which currently bars

all sleeping outside after 11 p.m.

In all, city officials received 58 written correspondences (excluding all letters generated by Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom) since the Safe Zones were first itemized for the May 23rd council agenda. Of those 58 written correspondences, 17 came from employees of one large corporation on the Westside, Texas Instruments. One couple, the Overbecks, wrote six e-mails, one per day. Seventeen others were in favor of the safe zones and decriminalizing sleep.

If you discount the corporate-generated e-mail blitz by Texas Instruments, the repetitive e-mailers, and all HUFF correspondences, you are left with only 18 people who have weighed in opposing the lifting of the Sleeping Ban in the industrial zones. That means the so-called avalanche of real people who are strongly opposed to letting homeless people sleep in vehicles, or on the sidewalk at night, amounts to 18

people in a city of 54,000.

And what did those 18 people say? Here are some excerpts: "urine," "feces," "garbage," "burglary," "kidnapping," "drunks," "drug addicts," "panhandlers," "lazy," "homeless by choice," "magnet for homeless people," "I'm afraid to walk to my car at night," "hypodermic needles," "mentally ill," "let them sleep somewhere else," "let them sleep in shelters," "piles of old mattresses," and even "proud to be a NIMBY."

These people seemed to be concerned about everything *but* poor people sleeping.

What did Beiers, Fitzmaurice, and other council members hear that was so convincing? Did the bigoted and uneducated opinions expressed make it okay to forbid homeless people from sleeping at night? The Santa Cruz Police Department reported that 51 homeless people were the victims of assault last year alone. Recent newspaper articles disclose three instances where homeless people were beaten up and airlifted to Stanford Medical Center. The lack of safe sleeping zones is a real health and safety emergency.

But the City Council appears to be ready to cave in to the fear-of-dog-poop crowd. Have they ever stayed awake all night and lived in fear, as hundreds of homeless people do every night? Other than 28 spaces in the always-full ISSP shelter program, over a thousand other homeless people have no legal place in the City to sleep at night.

Safe Zones are needed. They will provide a legal place where homeless people can sleep in well-lighted places and in groups. The squawking of a few NIMBYs is no excuse for denying people their human rights. These NIMBYs aren't even affected residents, since the "safe zones"