The executive summary can be read at www.appliedsurveyresearch.org

Beach Flats Affordable Housing Update

Residents Unidos activists in Santa Cruz suffered several serious setbacks after a high point of organizational strength this summer. [See Street Spirit, August, 2000, “Taking a Stand Against the Bulldozers and Evictors.”]

Residents of the Dolphin and Lee Apartments were struggling to get the Santa Cruz City Council to pass legal guarantees of assured relocation and return, before they were handed over to the monoply nonprofit Mercy Housing Corporation (previously Mercy Charities Housing) for demolition and rebuilding.

Mercy Housing continued to meet behind closed doors, spurning tenant requests for open meetings (and prompting one lawsuit from activist Robert Nørse). On July 25, the City Council voted to sever the activist Lee tenants from the proposed redevelopment project, relieving Lee tenants for the moment, but demoralizing the more vulnerable Dolphin residents in a rather cynical "divide and conquer" strategy.

To avoid controversy in the fall elections, City Council candidates ran for cover, skipping a Beach Flats Fiesta and a televised forum on the issue. Mercy backers on SCAN, the Santa Cruz Action Network, whose "progressive" machine has elected most City Councillmembers recently, pulled political strings, dissolved the activist Housing Committee and disaffiliated itself from the forum, violating a late-spring mandate voted by the SCAN membership to support the demands of the Dolphin and Lee tenants.

In October, Mayor Keith Sugar, who had repeatedly promised never to vote to acquire the Dolphin for Mercy Housing until it had a clear and person-by-person relocation plan, joined a unanimous vote to buy it for $1.5 million without any such plan. In private, he admitted that he couldn't find the relevant relocation law and that "not everyone who lives there will be able to return."

Two weeks later, Sugar supported a second unanimous vote that approved the bulldozing of 45 family housing units nearby without a written building inspector's report. A third vote a week later at a special Halloween-day council meeting awarded a $1.5 million, 30-year loan at 0% interest to Mercy Housing (with indications that the "loan" would be turned into a grant at some point to buy the Dolphin outright.

No legally binding guarantees were ever made that the 200-plus low-income, Spanish-speaking residents, many of them undocumented, would have adequate housing or be able to return to the smaller number of units that will be built after the demolition. No materials were released in Spanish in the rush to vote before the November election.

The televised forum, which included a one-hour documentary called “Promise or Promises?” exposed the City Council’s machinations around the Dolphin-Lee project. Activists vowed to carefully monitor any evictions from the Dolphin under Mercy management. As of late November, no one reportedly had been evicted, though Mercy did require all the tenants to sign new leases. The latest report from a source close to the mayor is that Mercy is now planning on rebuilding only 19 units to replace the 47 it will destroy in the name of affordable housing.

“Boxer” Billy Found Frozen to Death

Also in Beach Flats, the body of “Boxer” Billy Denson was found in the early morning hours of November 11th, in a carport. Boxer Billy, a legless man confined to a wheelchair, had been a longtime homeless resident in Santa Cruz. He had lost his legs when, as he lay on the ground passed out from alcohol, a man poured gasoline on his legs and set him on fire. Although prosecutors knew the man that had burned Billy, he was never prosecuted for that crime.

“I fed him breakfast on the morning the day before he died,” said his friend John. “He was fine.” Billy’s death marks the fifth homeless death in two months. Two suicides by hanging, two overdoses, and now an apparent death by hypothermia have hit the homeless community.

No official count of homeless deaths is tallied; the Santa Cruz County Coroner keeps no statistics on homeless deaths. In spite of unseasonably freezing temperatures at night, the Santa Cruz City Council took no action to open the Armory Winter Shelter early or lift the Sleeping, Blanket, and Camping Bans. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors has refused to allow homeless people to sleep in any of the spacious unused county parking lots.

Sleeping in vehicles and outside remains a crime on public property in both the city and county. Several groups are planning mass protests to pressure public officials to restore the right of homeless people to shelter themselves without criminal penalties.