

Santa Cruz Ratchets Up Anti-Homeless Clampdown

by Becky Johnson

In this picturesque seaside tourist town of 54,000, Santa Cruz officials voted on September 18 for parking restrictions which will only affect homeless people.

Despite three shelter emergency declarations by the Santa Cruz City Council, none of which has been revoked, City Manager Dick Wilson, Parks and Recreation Director Jim Lang, Police Chief Steven Belcher, and Public Works directors Matt Farrell and Ron Marquez teamed up to declare that parking must be prohibited on the four city streets most used by homeless people at night in the weedy, dusty, industrial section of Santa Cruz.

Moreover, this item was prepared without discussions with homeless advocates, social service providers, or homeless people themselves and was written while the council was on summer vacation. Councilmember Emily Reilly, who made the motion, called it a "compromise." But a compromise between whom?

When an area businessman testified that the restrictions would hurt his ability to park emergency vehicles connected with his business there, Reilly contacted city staff members to facilitate some sort



Homeless men and woman sleeping on a rainy night on the sheltered front entrance of the main downtown post office in Santa Cruz.

Alene Smith
photo

of exception for that business. She coldly ignored the plight of the homeless people her motion would so drastically affect.

Unable to afford the high housing costs in Santa Cruz, hundreds of homeless people have been forced by economic necessity to use their vehicles as homes. For years, the two industrial areas of Santa Cruz have been an unofficial "home" for both long-

distance truckers who need to park and sleep, and for homeless people who do not want to bother residents or businesses, and choose to park away from them. In May of 2000, the council voted to establish safe sleeping zones there, before abandoning the effort a month later.

The likely impact of the parking restrictions will be to disturb the already

fragile sleep of those forced to live in their vehicles. Sleeping between the hours of 11 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. outdoors or in a vehicle is already prohibited. The new parking restriction will be in effect seven days a week and will threaten expensive tickets and towing for those vehicles whose drivers don't wake up and move them. Since the vehicles of homeless people typically contain the sum of their worldly belongings, such towing affects their ability to survive at all.

Santa Cruz documented 1273 homeless people in a single-night head count in the city, and 30 percent of the homeless populace live in their vehicles. The city has shelter space for only 39.

Three unpaid tickets will result in the "booting" of the vehicle. Lack of prompt payment will result in the towing of the vehicle. To get the vehicle back, one must pay the \$154 tow charge and the \$54-per-day storage rate that North County Towing charges, as well as the cost of the tickets. "It could cost up to \$500 for a homeless person to get their vehicle back," said Linda Lemaster, the former chair of the Homeless Issues Task Force.

The parking restriction seems so innocuous. Yet it is insidious. The staff