

Santa Cruz Concocts New Homeless-Removal Plan

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by Becky Johnson

The garden planter on Pacific Avenue and Walnut Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz is a lovely place. The well-kept garden, the cool shade of the trees, and the spectacle of the sheer variety of people walking up and down Pacific Avenue remind many of why they moved to Santa Cruz in the first place.

The staff members at Rosie McCann's Irish Pub, the upstairs restaurant, said the whole problem began when the City privatized an idetical planter in front of the New Leaf Market in February of 2002. City staff, according to a *Santa Cruz Sentinel* article, said that the people who sit at the planter engage in drug dealing, sexual harassment, and are obnoxious drunks.

From December through February, the manager of the nearby Pacific Trading Company kept a running log of complaints. Her regular reports were sent to Keith Holtaway of the Downtown Association, Julie Hendee of the Redevelopment Agency, the City Council and the police. The reports did not document police harassment or abuse of homeless people.

On May 18, CSO Officer Bachtel issued a \$162 citation to a young man near the planter who made the mistake of standing on his stationary skateboard. He was issued an illegal skateboarding ticket. Increased police harassment has reduced the planter population, driving the displaced youth, homeless people, and musicians to public benches — leaving less space for elderly residents, who often prefer the now-crowded benches to the cold planter surface.

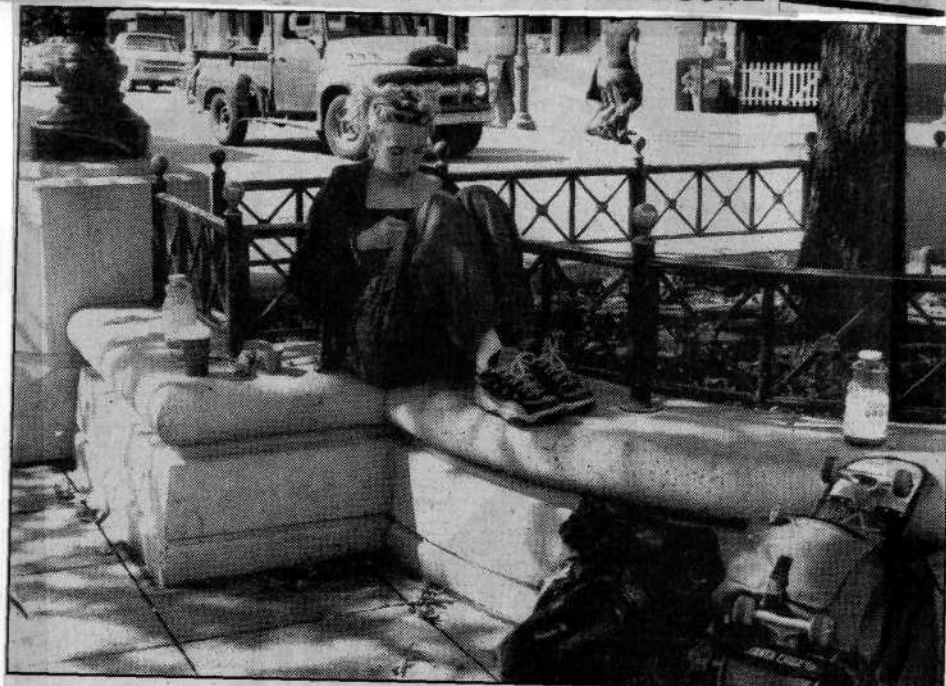
The manager at Pacific Trading Company said she was not "authorized to talk about the planter," although she has

been keeping meticulous records of events near her store involving musicians, clowns, and people sitting and "staring." By her own record, she called the police 22 times in 41 days. Phone calls placed to the owner were not returned.

The manager of the Costa Brava Restaurant, which faces the planter, was not available for comment and did not return phone calls. What can they say? Can they really say that closing the planter to sitting is not an effort to remove homeless people from sight? Their pleas of how hard it is to remain profitable sound hollow when compared to the needs of homeless people simply to exist in public, to be able to survive the elements, the poverty, the assaults and robberies, and the verbal abuse from bigots.

On June 6, the City of Santa Cruz is planning on removing forever, for all people, nearly 30 seating spaces from public use in order to accommodate the whims of three nearby businesses. Assistant City Manager Martin Bernal said that there was no need for public hearings or even to agendaize the changes because "the railing is old and rusty and it's part of the normal maintenance." The planters and railings were installed well after the 1989 earthquake which devastated the downtown area of Santa Cruz.

When questioned further about the lack of public and City Council input, Bernal shrugged and said that if any councilmember had contacted him with a serious question, concern, or objection, he would have postponed the June 6th "seating removal" date.



Homeless teen sits on planter bench in downtown Santa Cruz. City planners have designed few places for young people to hang out.

Lydia Gans
photo

Santa Cruz will remove sitting space on planter benches in the downtown in order to discourage homeless gatherings. Although peaceable assembly was a right guaranteed by the framers of the U.S. Constitution, the wrong kind of people are not allowed to peaceably assemble in the city.