

Homeless Protests Force San Jose Mayor's Hand

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by Robert Norse

Several months of high-profile protests, marches, and a housing takeover with many arrests forced San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales to abruptly change his long-standing policy of providing no more money for low-income housing. The Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) of San Jose won what CHAM member Sandy Perry termed "an astounding victory" on May 8.

After repeatedly pleading poverty, Mayor Gonzales doubled the Emergency Low Income fund by unexpectedly backing a proposal at City Council to add \$13.8 million in Redevelopment Agency money to build units for hundreds of poor and homeless families in the next few years.

CHAM has not been shy about squaring off against the San Jose authorities on issues of homeless shelter. Standing up for civil rights for homeless people, CHAM activists went to jail last year for resisting sleeping bans and laws that criminalize the poor there. A few years ago, CHAM was involved in a months-long confrontation with the powers that be when city officials threatened to close First Christian Church for opening its building to homeless families. Though First Christian and CHAM weathered the hostile storm from City Hall, the chilling pressure intimidated First Christian into making its parish hall off-limits to homeless families from August, 1999, through late 2000.



Homeless protesters prepare to march from San Jose's First Christian Church.

In November, 2000, activist instincts and homeless needs prevailed. The parish hall reopened its doors to homeless people. At present, 50-60 people sleep nightly on the floor of the church hall. CHAM and community pressure also prompted the City of San Jose to pump \$400,000 into the CHAPP (Community Homeless Alliance Pilot Project), a program that developed low-income housing to move families off the church floor into livable units.

In the current campaign for housing, advocates went to San Jose City Hall to demand that they establish a special category of housing for ELI (Extremely Low Income) families — those that make less than \$26,000 per year. A day before, in a "summit meeting" with CHAM Pastor Scott Wagers, Gonzales indicated he would oppose the proposed \$13.8 million expansion and that the City Council would vote it down.

But when CHAM and other activists appeared at a City Council meeting on May 8, Mayor Gonzales abruptly capitulated, saying he would increase ELI spending to 30 percent of the affordable housing spending. Over the next 10 years, this would impact several thousand people (though only creating several hundred new units).

Many homeless people (in fact, the majority) would remain vulnerable outside. Those on SSI and many others even poorer than the Extremely Low Income category would still be outside, scrambling for shrinking housing stock as residential hotels disappear for gentrification development. The current housing shortage, Perry estimates, could be up to 20,000 units, but the protests have led to a significant concession by city politicians.

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What prompted this victory? CHAM, the Affordable Housing Network, and other civil rights/affordable housing groups put together a coalition of 28 organizations who signed on to this particular proposal. The backers included City commissions like the Human Rights Commission and Housing Advisory Commission, several churches, Central Labor Council, and other community groups.

After several high-profile group arrests last year where CHAM activists went to jail after being arrested by the dozens at City Hall and in the Mayor's Office to get his ear, they tried a different tack. This year on January 30th, CHAM came in force to ask the Mayor for a meeting. He agreed and the next day they met and prayed in the lobby of his office.

In February, the CHAM coalition began a series of rallies in front of some boarded-up houses on 5th Street owned by the Redevelopment Agency. The point was to dramatize the fact that usable homes are being locked away from needy families in a city teeming with homeless people. In fact, the City's plan is to build a new \$329-million City Hall after destroying the existing housing there.

In March, the Coalition's ranks were swelled with students from Santa Clara

University, San Jose State, De Anza College, and San Jose City College. A new militant group, Students for Justice, joined in the organizing.

On April 6, the CHAM coalition struck in earnest. Cops, Perry explained, were coming by all day asking if the group was going to take over the housing. Until the very last minute, the activists weren't sure, since there were weather problems, less people than they'd hoped and a PG&E bankruptcy preempting the media.

At 5:30 a.m., 40 to 50 people went inside a nice home converted in the mid-'90s from a single-family dwelling to an SRO (Single Room Occupancy) building. There were 15 rooms in all, housing fifteen people, in excellent condition with wall-to-wall carpeting and running water. The activists occupied the building until 34 were arrested and charged with trespassing. Over 100 supporters outside watched and cheered.

On April 17, the CHAM coalition followed up with a large march from First Christian Church down to City Hall into the City Council Meeting. The mayor gave the crowd of 180 people a few minutes to address the council. A second rally on May 1st at City Hall netted 100-150 people, who again got special time to address the City Council. Said Mayor Gonzales to Pastor Wagers, "Scott, you can't keep doing this every meeting." Replied CHAM member Adrienne Lawton, "Mayor, you can't keep leaving these kids out on the street."

Gonzales fought till the last to block the expanded ELI housing, saying he was building higher-income housing to meet the needs of teachers, police, and firefighters. Siphoning the money off into poorer families would prevent these improvements. But on May 8, Gonzales surrendered. He also agreed to restart the CHAPP project, funded at its previous level of \$400,000 in the June budget.

Coming up next in San Jose: the campaign for rent control and a Just Eviction Ordinance. ACORN (Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now), PACT (People Acting in Community Together), and the CHAM coalition will rally on June 4 at St. Patrick's Church with a goal of 1000 people.

Contact CHAM at 408-295-4463 for more information.

(cont. 1) Homeless Protests.
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