

# Driving on a Long Road to Nowhere

**In Santa Barbara, the hopes of homeless vehicle dwellers are betrayed by city officials.**

by Robert Norse

“I went off,” admitted activist Nancy McCradie of Santa Barbara’s Homes on Wheels. McCradie stood up in the middle of a Santa Barbara City Council meeting on September 24 after hearing homeless vehicle dwellers denounced as thieves and rapists. “I called her a goddamned liar, then went outside followed by ten police officers and cried my eyes out.”

At issue was a watered-down proposal for parking sites for Santa Barbara’s 300-350 recreational vehicles, which serve as affordable housing for the poor, the disabled, and the otherwise homeless. After more than two years of meetings, the City Council’s Ordinance Committee presented a wholly inadequate set of permitted locations in business parking lots, with added restrictions that allowed vehicle dwellers only a seven-hour window from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m.

“Only one vehicle per business parking lot would be allowed,” explained attorney Glen Mowrer, “ironically, only in the area between the freeway and the ocean where there had been most complaints of congestion.”

“Business people,” said McCradie, “didn’t feel that parking lots downtown should be used because our vehicles are too big and might scare the tourists.”



A homeless vehicle dweller with his dog. RVs provide the only affordable housing for many poor residents of affluent cities where rents have risen.

Lydia Gans  
photo

Meanwhile, the City has posted 90-minute parking signs down by the zoo, trying to eliminate the place where many homeless vehicle dwellers currently park. Many of them are disabled, however, which exempts them from the laws.

Two weeks earlier, Santa Barbara Mayor Marty Blum — also on the board of directors of Homes on Wheels — broke her word to McCradie and the unhoused community by supporting unprecedented restrictions on parking RVs throughout the city. The current 72-hour limit in unmetered areas is now due to be replaced with a two-hour parking limit throughout the city and a 2 a.m.-6 a.m. ban at night. Blum’s assurance that these new enforcement provisions will only be passed when there are “adequate alternatives” for those who must live in their vehicles has not reassured activists.

Writer and activist Peter Marin said, “City staff has just recommended there be no parking on city lots because they want churches to take care of the poor. It’s a denial of any responsibility on the part of liberal politicians. We see it in San Francisco, in Jerry Brown’s Oakland, in Santa Cruz. I’m pissed off because we put in two years on this with minimum response on the part of the City Council. Nobody treats the poor as if there’s any kind of urgency or crisis. They act like they’re permanent vacationers who are despoiling the landscape by parking large RVs and spoiling the view for others.”

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Marin said that the failure of liberal politicians to provide housing for the poorest citizens is an especially disturbing betrayal. "You've seen it in every city," Marin said. "Ostensibly liberal people have bad laws and pretend to cooperate in taking care of the poor — and do nothing. They create affordable housing which will be assigned to people who work for the local merchants. That's where they're spending their dollars: encouraging local merchants to pay low wages. But the truly poor on fixed incomes don't get housing and they don't get the right to park their vehicles anywhere unless private people come up with immense amounts of money to give them a place to park. No promise of a single cent has been expended on these projects."

Santa Barbara's housing activists faulted Mayor Blum for failing to find sites for a City-sponsored RV park for homeless vehicle dwellers and question why she hasn't allotted funds or property from the Redevelopment Agency's millions to deal with the crisis of homelessness.

"It has come to nothing so far," said Marin, speaking of the two-year lobbying effort to set up legal places for RVs in Santa Barbara. "We see the same series of congenial gestures that politicians have made for 2000 years."

Santa Barbara's sleeping ban law hasn't been enforced for some years. Its camping ban is essentially on hold due to persistent and creative legal opposition from attorney Glen Mowrer of the Committee for Social Justice. Mowrer, former head of the public defender's office and the Green Party candidate for state attorney general, has won several acquittals of homeless defendants charged with violating the camping ban, and has carried out a successful courtroom fight to establish the necessity defense in Santa Barbara. [See "Defender of the Homeless Wins Important Court Ruling." *Street Spirit*, February 2002.]

Mowrer recently was successful in expanding this defense to the parking ticket arena, which requires bail, involves a more cumbersome administrative process, and has "interests of justice" language, which is harder to hold judges to than the necessity defense. Though tickets are only \$25, if not paid they can lead to the towing of a person's vehicle/home.

The Santa Barbara City Attorney recently spent nearly \$1000 for an attorney, several police officers, and two city staff members in an attempt to prosecute two \$25 tickets. The target of the tickets was a disabled woman in her 60s who was parking in a "No parking" zone especially placed to criminalize homeless people at night. Twice hospitalized for a heart attack and fainting spells two days before, she was first turned down by the administrative hearing officer on the theory that she should have gotten someone else to move her vehicle.

Commissioner De Caro heard nearly two hours of testimony documenting the disabled woman's medication, her treatment, and her attempts to get help, and threw out the case, suggesting she was single and too ill, and that her moving the vehicle would have endangered the public.

"Think about what it costs to fight this ticket and how willing the city is to go to the mat with something as trivial as this," said Mowrer.

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The law includes an exemption allowing three vehicles to stay in the parking lots of willing nonprofits and churches; yet only five churches out of Santa Barbara's 250 churches with parking lots allow homeless people to park at night.

In response to Mayor Blum and the City Council's waffling on allowing sites for legal RV camping, McCradie's Homes on Wheels group distributed 1000 flyers. On every three-quarter-ton and larger vehicle within 10 miles of Santa Barbara, in Spanish and English, appeared the message: "Ordinance 10.44.200 would prohibit the parking of trailers, mobile homes, RVs, trucks, and buses on all city streets for periods longer than 2 hours in the daytime and in the nighttime between 2 am and 6 am. You will be subject to ticketing for violation, and seizure of your vehicle if not paid in a timely manner. Parking in front of your own home will be grounds for a ticket under this ordinance."

Perhaps in response to McCradie's distribution of flyers, and her passionate speaking and the impact of 23 other speakers at City Council meetings, the council moved to delay the decision on how few sites to allow for another week. A subsequent council session would later vote on the "RVers get out" enforcement provision.

"If they pass this law without alternative solutions for people," promised McCradie, "there will be creative protests involving the parking of RVs at the police department, the County building, and City Hall, as well as creative parading between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. along State Street and perhaps in residential areas. We're gonna have so much fun, it's not gonna be funny."

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