

Liberal Santa Cruz Is Named One of Meanest Cities

by Becky Johnson

As news spread of the naming of Santa Cruz as one of the 12 "meanest cities" in the United States towards homeless people, members of the City Council and social service providers who regularly seek funding from the council scrambled to disavow the designation.

City Councilmember Keith Sugar, quoted in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, asked, "We do what we can (and) we can certainly do more, but why are they saying this? What makes us particularly mean? It is hard for me to respond without seeing the report."

Most members of the City Council have argued that Santa Cruz works hard for the homeless and rarely gets credit for its good work. They point to services such as the Homeless Resource Center that provides breakfast and dinner, and to various emergency shelters in town.

But the City Council has refused to suspend the Sleeping Ban, a prime reason for the designation of Santa Cruz as one of the 12 meanest cities. Councilmember Sugar could put the Sleeping Ban on the agenda for repeal, but he won't. For years, some city officials have preached that if the ban on sleeping were lifted, a deluge of homeless people would swamp the city and overwhelm city services.



A woman sleeps on the floor of a shelter in Santa Cruz, chosen as one of the "Meanest Cities" because it bans sleeping but has too few shelter beds.

Lydia Gans
photo

Others disagree, backed by research from the City Council's own Task Force to Examine the Camping Ordinance (1998-9), the City's Council's Homeless Issues Task Force (1999-2000), and the experiences of Miami, Portland, Austin, and Santa Barbara. In these cities, sleeping bans were lifted without any massive influx or increased demand on social services. True in Florida, the visible appearance of more homeless people, who no longer had to hide, prompted embarrassed city officials to create more social services. But the "magnet theory" was resoundingly discredited.

Councilmember Sugar could push for a new location for Camp Paradise, the clean and sober, environmentally sensitive camp which was washed out by a flood on December 1. Silence speaks volumes. Even worse, Sugar tacked on a feel-good plan to evacuate from the river in the event of flooding in order to sugarcoat reactionary Councilmember Emily Reilly's resolution to "enforce the camping ordinance on the river," designed to drive away Camp Paradise. But City staff never revealed or implemented any evacuation plan five weeks later when the river actually flooded. Sugar remained silent.

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Why does Santa Cruz deserve the "meanest" designation? Activists from HUFF (Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom) composed a list which is not by any means comprehensive:

- ◆ The Sleeping Ban criminalizes the act of sleep in a city with 1500-2000 homeless people and shelter for only 160.

- ◆ It is illegal to ask for spare change after dark.

- ◆ Police enforce laws against homeless people but ignore tourists and middle-class people for doing the same thing (i.e., having dogs on the mall, sitting on the sidewalk, jaywalking, etc.).

- ◆ No parking signs were installed right where homeless people live in their vehicles, 5 a.m. to 7 a.m., seven days a week.

- ◆ Community service costs \$25 to register when homeless people try to work off fines from camping and sleeping tickets.

- ◆ Police issue \$182 tickets to pedestrians on the bridge separating the Homeless Services Center from County services.

- ◆ The City ignored and dumped the 28 recommendations from its own Homeless Issues Task Force which it spent \$10,000 to create — all except the one creating an extra police position for Officer Eric Seiley, who roamed the riverbank harassing homeless people and Camp Paradise.

- ◆ The City closed porto-potties and bathrooms all over town, then blamed the homeless for urinating and defecating.

- ◆ Abusive police officers are left on the force, with police review a joke.

- ◆ The private towing company, North County, punitively removes the homes of homeless people living in their vehicles, with the City leveling huge fines, and the company imposing expensive tow charges and storage fees, as well as theft and destruction of homeless people's property.

- ◆ Police destroy the property of homeless people and fail to compensate them for their loss.

- ◆ Parks and Rec workers slash the tents of homeless people.

- ◆ Police push homeless people out from under the eaves of downtown businesses and into the rain.

Councilmember Sugar was sent a shorter version of this list of specifics several days before this story went to print. We received no word from him by press

time. Sugar, an environmental attorney elected on promises of reining in police misconduct and decriminalizing basic life functions for homeless people, has dropped that commitment. His record of resisting contact with homeless advocates is legendary. At the last meeting he had with Robert Norse in February 1999, Sugar stormed off when Norse picked up a pencil to make a note, demanding that no record be kept of the meeting.

While councilmembers attempted to discard the findings upon seeing that the source of information for the report came from HUFF activists, no one dared dispute any individual finding. "It's a blame-the-messenger routine," said Norse of HUFF. "While they can't really dispute any individual claim we make, they will discard it all as full of so many errors that they don't know where to start."

Friends of Camp Paradise supporter Carl Wilson commented, "Well, maybe they are not mean. Maybe they're just cruel."

In a broadcast on Free Radio Santa Cruz in mid-January, Camp Paradise founder Larry Templeton gave the City Council 48 hours to designate a legal site for a new encampment. He invited the broader homeless community to join him in a campaign against the Camping Ban. At press time, he announced he would be setting up Camp Paradise again before the end of the month.

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