

Activists Win Survival Victories in Santa Cruz

by Robert Norse

Still saddled with an anti-homeless Sleeping Ban and a broader Camping Ban, the Santa Cruz homeless community has held its own against the City Council's "life-and-safety-be-damned" mentality as well as police pressure on the poor to "hide out or get out." Thanks to strong pressure from activists and a hang-tough determination by Camp Paradise veterans, Santa Cruz has even posted some small gains recently. After months of community pressure at City Hall in support of Camp Paradise, the City Council yielded four small victories to the homeless-run encampment that was flooded out last December.

Victory #1: Santa Cruz Service Corps

The Santa Cruz Service Corps, a conservation corps formed by community members and Camp Paradise veterans, won council approval of the temporary use of a building for \$1 a month, which became Paradise's daytime job-search headquarters. Though due to be demolished soon to make way for a costly family shelter, Paradise activists secured reluctant permission from Homeless Services Center director Ken Cole to lease the building on a monthly basis, and moved swiftly to repaint it and make it habitable.



A homeless panhandler on Pacific Ave. in Santa Cruz. Homeless people often seek tents or sleeping bags as these are frequently seized and destroyed by the police.

Victory #2: Paradise Regained

Camp Paradise survived the winter, its numbers greatly reduced, in spite of internal turmoil, external repression, and the City Council's failure to come through with evacuation help or timely ordinance changes. After Paradise was flooded out in December, it solicited public and private funding which provided several weeks in a motel for more than two dozen members. After the flood, they cleaned up their riverside campsite and resumed conservation projects for the community; camp survivors then moved into state parks for a month and a half, in spite of new anti-homeless park policies that prohibit use of any state park for more than a month per year.

Then came a month of outlaw sleeping, sometimes in the Santa Cruz Service Corps headquarters itself. "With police on our heels whenever we tried to set up our tents, there was just nowhere else to go," admitted Camp founder Larry Templeton. By March, Paradise finally struck paydirt and found sanctuary behind a church outside the Santa Cruz City limits (since camping on church property inside City limits is punishable by a nightly \$54 fine).

Victory #3: Camping law liberalized

The first liberalization of a section of the Camping Ordinance since 1999 made the lawbooks. Camping on city park land had been limited to three days per year in three large city parks in a provision only used by the AIDS Bike-a-Thon and an annual dog show. Elaborate requirements for permits included parking control, traffic

Lydia Gans photo

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control, toilet facilities, washing facilities, security and liability insurance, garbage collection and cleanup, security and cleanup deposits, and health and safety deposits — far beyond the reach of many housed and virtually all homeless groups.

Embarrassed at activist pressure and their own broken commitments, the City Council unanimously passed a modification of the law over the opposition of the town's conservative newspaper, some Parks & Recreation Department employees, and some shrill letter writers.

The new law allows groups of 15 people or less doing conservation projects to camp at one of the parks for two weeks while doing the project, provided they meet the laundry list of conditions above as well as additional California Environmental Quality Act requirements. Parks and Rec Czar Jim Lang has the final word, but confided that Camp Paradise already had an application on file, in spite of the many hurdles.

Victory #4: A bad law shot down

Homeless activists held the line against, and then reversed, a misguided council decision that passed new restrictive laws to cut back homeless camping space on private property by 90 percent. Back in 1999, City Attorney Barisone misread council intentions and wrote into law a buried sentence applying a three-

days-per-month limit on all camping on private property. The three-day limit was actually intended only on camping in a vehicle in a residential driveway.

Undiscovered until January of this year, the improperly extended three-day limit was gruffly and explicitly ratified by the City Council. Then two weeks later, under loud and persistent activist pressure, the council reversed the bad law in a rare case of councilmembers keeping a commitment to the homeless in a timely manner. The restored law now affirms that homeless people can sleep on private property in yards (backyards as well as other yards separated from public view) and in vehicles on church and business parking lots without a three-day limit.

The City Council reaffirmed the three-day limit for private driveways, even though police produced no complaints showing that there had been any problems there. And all sleeping on public property remains illegal. "We beat them back with facts and documents," concluded one activist, "now we need our own Dignity Village, many Camp Paradises, and an end to the Sleeping Ban."

For more information, e-mail HUFF at morse@hotmail.com, call (831) 423-4833, or come to HUFF meetings Wednesdays 8:30 a.m. at 1107 Ocean St. (Baker's Square Restaurant).

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