

"Ten Minutes, Then Jail"

"Your city already has too many laws that target homeless people."

— Michael Stoops, writing to Santa Cruz officials on behalf of the National Coalition for the Homeless

by Becky Johnson

Santa Cruz, CA — It's not as if there are too few laws on the books already. Sleeping (only at night) is illegal. Sitting on the sidewalk less than 14 feet from a building rates a \$162 citation. Hackysacking, hopscotching, blowing bubbles (if you are an amateur), and holding up a sign saying, "Hungry, God Bless," after dark are already crimes.

The police say these ordinances are "tools" which they need to enforce the peace. Street corners on Pacific Avenue where hippie kids linger with their colored mops, silver studs, and juvenile chatter have been sanitized by placing brand new change machines on the sidewalk.

It's illegal to sit within 50 feet of a change machine or ATM. So the city has been putting up change machines like mad. One is now in front of the Metro bus station and another is a stone's throw away, at Elm and Pacific Avenue.

A simple thing like a change machine eliminates the kids who hung out there at "Punk Corner" after they had been chased away from in front of Borders Books. And from "Hippie Planter" before that. And from "Hippie Corner" before that. And from San Lorenzo Park long before that.

Even the Homeless Services Center has installed new "no loitering" signs where once picnic tables provided legal refuge.

But for Matt Farrell, parking director for the Public Works Department, that is not enough. Farrell and Santa Cruz Police Chief Howard Skerry have cooked up another ordinance which criminalizes innocent behavior. They want to make it illegal to stay in a parking lot or parking structure for more than 10 minutes. Those failing to leave would be cited for trespassing.

The Food Not Bombs regular Wednesday feeding in the parking lot next to the Farmer's Market would be illegal without a permit.

Santa Cruz Sentinel writer Shana McCord reports that some downtown merchants fear walking to their cars after work and having to pass groups of people hanging out there. "The garages are a magnet for the area's homeless, especially during the rainy winter months," she writes following an interview with Skerry.

"So this is a problem?" said street vocalist Coral Brune. "I'd be offended if homeless people didn't go into the garages to stay dry. Everyone does that."

Chief Skerry reports that vandalism and theft of vehicles parked in the public lots

are problems. But how is citing someone standing in a parking lot too long going to stop any vandalism or theft? They are already illegal under existing laws.

And then there is the public urination problem. Apparently, late at night, right after all the bars close, and there is no open bathroom on Pacific Avenue, some people urinate in the parking lots. Our City Fathers and Mothers, in their great wisdom, have ordained that to stop bar patrons from publicly urinating, they've decided to make it illegal to remain in parking lots for longer than ten minutes.

Forget opening a public restroom! It would only be a magnet for homeless people who would presumably migrate all the way to Santa Cruz from cities back east.

"This is an anti-homeless ordinance, pure and simple," says Bob Patton, a member of the Human Rights Organization in Santa Cruz. "You know that the people who will be cited will be homeless."

Patton attended a meeting of the Santa Cruz City Council in January in an effort to speak out against the ordinance. "At the last minute they pulled it off the agenda," he reports. It was not to be a slam-dunk.

At the end of January, the citizen-staffed Downtown Commission took up the Ten Minutes to Jail ordinance, but after excellent public citizen input, voted to postpone a decision for two months.

"Our public records requests to the police department and the city staff resulted in a letter simply claiming that there are no written documents about this," homeless activist Robert Norse said. "Apparently neither the city police department nor the

Public Works Department made any attempt to document statistics to justify this new law. Commission members were moved by speakers who questioned what would happen if an older person couldn't move fast enough, or if someone just hung out in their car awaiting family members to return. The Commission decided to wait for more substantial information from the police department."

But Matt Farrell, eager to put the ordinance before the City Council, seemed oblivious to the Commission's decision to wait two months. "I'm trying to schedule it for March 9th at 8:30 a.m., but so far I don't have a quorum," he said.

Homeless people are not waiting for a decision. They have a new set of problems. The police have begun ticketing them for sleeping in the daytime, despite the law which only criminalizes nighttime sleeping. "They are planning protests," Norse reports.

a city of brotherly love

by Randy Finland

plastic talk
calypsos by
to the salsa beat
hipper two-steppers twirl
on these crumbled streets
proof it's no place

to dance
because the revolution
that'll turn the heat of
compassion up
has yet to show
credible choreography