

Muzzle the Message—Isolate the Messenger !

Speech to the Community and Board of Supervisors by Robert Norse 4-21-15

As demands are mounting throughout the country for meaningful police accountability, Sheriff Hart has crafted another unusual response to demands for local reform. Wall off the protesters. Attack the whistle-blowers. Haul out the “public danger” warnings. Spread more groundless fear. Create more fences, walls, and forbidden zones. Isolated and extinguish any effective protest.

Will this approach work? Is it halting protest against law enforcement violence and secrecy across the country? Will it work in Santa Cruz? Police killings of Oklahoma's Eric Harris, Maryland's Freddie Grey, Illinois Rekia Boyd—and, of course, Ferguson's Michael Brown. I can't breathe—now more than ever.

It's not clear to me how much progress the Sheriff has made in addressing embarrassing demands made by protesters who assemble outside the jail including (1) End the privatization of California Medical Group “let 'em die” policies; (2) Accept responsibility for unnatural deaths; implement grand jury recommendations demanding expansion of mental health; (3) abolish use of solitary confinement, abolition of the restraint chair (“torture chair”); (4) Cancel the 24.6 million planned expansion of the Round Tree Expansion Center in Watsonville.& the recommendations of the civil Grand Jury.

Daily we read of new abuses by police agencies across the country ranging from black site detention centers in Chicago's Homan Square to heavily armed police shooting down people in San Jose and Salinas to the videoed tasing of Oliver Howard outside the adjacent courthouse October 13th. Institutionalized racism, routine abuse of disabled people, and open season on the poor and homeless have prompted rage and street response throughout the nation even in well-behaved Santa Cruz.

The sheriff's reaction to the protests? \$48 grand for another fence—7' high. Wall 'em off! Make the voices of protest more diminished and distant. Maybe they'll disappear.

Two months ago, we read sheriff's original proposal—to allow him unlimited discretion to declare whatever parts of the jail property he wished “forbidden zones.” Facing massive protest, Hart's deputy backed off and “clarified” Hart was only seeking to properly demark existing “no trespass” areas. It appears his aim now and apparently then is and was much broader.

Earlier “no go” zones created by CAO Susan Mauriello at the County Building and the Courthouse were designed to intimidate peaceful activists from the right of peaceable assembly such as the PeaceCamp2010 and 2011 Occupy Santa Cruz protests.

The sheriff openly admits targeting recent peaceful protesters who had denounced abuses at the jail such as the privatized medical facilities apparently responsible for the death of nearly half a dozen inmates, Sin Barras, HUFF, and other organizations have been concerned with solitary confinement, torture devices like the restraining chair, abusive expansion of the prison system under the guise of reform, and the continuation of the futile expensive cruel Drug Prohibition War, which funds courts, lawyers, jail personnel, and others enmeshed in the prison-industrial complex.

Does the rising of the students demanding Black Lives Matter even in liberal Santa Cruz give the sheriff an excuse to claim a non-existent “public safety” hazard? Isn't insulating the jail from peaceful protest is another step in militarizing the community It steals from the public the right to peacefully protest & support inmates currently incarcerated—visibly & audibly. Hart's Bearcat dressed in “public safety” camouflage?

Why is it on the Consent Agenda, falsely suggesting it needs no serious debate? Are Hart and the Board taking a page from SCPD Chief Vogel and Deputy Chief Clark in an endrun around community opinion through last-minute rushed consent Agenda passage? Last meeting we saw a misuse of the Consent Agenda to contract & shut down debate on the serious “no cannabis grows except WAMM” prohibition, with only 1 minute allowed on an item funneled off into the consent agenda.

Where is the public testimony from the adjacent community? Why is this matter being rushed forward after notice of only three days? Where is the public safety menace that justifies creating a concentration camp atmosphere outside the jail on the Blaine St. side?

Is guard treatment of inmates videoed and monitored to assure vulnerable prisoners are not regularly abused? Does the public have access to this video? Is there any independent oversight of the jails? Even distant protest must be fenced off, discouraged. If the Board bends over for this, the Community must resist.P