

Blue Box Banditry: Staff Strangles Street Culture

Extended Speech to Santa Cruz Community by Robert Norse 5-10-16 (Highlighted sections read at City Council)

Why should the community be concerned about **this law**? Which **limits art display, political tabling, and performance to a reduced number of blue boxes on Pacific Avenue**? Because it will reduce, disperse, and profoundly discourage vibrant street life there. For the past few year or more certain merchants have whispered behind closed doors to the willing ears of Julie Hende & Scott Collins that they don't like street activity in front of their stores. With a stroke of the pen, Hende & Collins—given extraordinary powers by the Council a year and a half ago—have accommodated those merchants. This proposed law is their latest move to “regulate” street life in what was a public sidewalk.

What are these new “regulations”? **This law proposes major changes. It bans art in textile, jewelry and other items from being exchanged or sold. It requires all political, artistic, and 1st Amendment activity with a display device to be inside a blue box.** It significantly expands police power by altering the 1-hour Move Along law. This “musical chairs” law **is already an unnecessary provocation and abuse and has prompted outrage and protest. It will now require everyone to time themselves or face \$250 citations, not simply to move when advised that an hour is up** (a ridiculous requirement generally). It is selectively and arbitrarily enforced—or not enforced. Police, when asked, will not explain. A ticket would no longer require any kind of prior warning. Police aren't following the current law, citing people without warning. It'll take community monitoring to change this. The City Attorney and Public Safety Committee seem okay with this practice. Which will now be solidified into law.

You (the community) probably haven't even heard about this law. Sentinel reporter Jessica York hasn't seen fit to write about it. And, **like most matters that appear at Council, staff has created a done deal before it reaches the eyes of the public. The law as proposed is exactly the same as that provided as a draft in April with not a word changed.** Which is probably why so little public comment is allowed. Why listen if you've already made up your mind?

I've written Mayor Mathews a letter requesting that adequate time be allowed for the public to consider this item. Organizations have traditionally received five minutes, individuals three—particularly in as important and permanent a matter as a change in the law.

A month ago, I outlined some of my concerns. The lack of public input. The lack of transparency in creating this law. The special position merchants hold with Julie Hende who, along with Scott Collins, cooked up this strangulation of street culture behind closed doors. The Mayor's failure to send this to the Downtown Commission so it could be vetted and a public discussion actually initiated. The failure to reach out to stakeholders who will face criminal prosecution and exorbitant fines (when court costs are added).

Since staffers Hende and Collins presented their dog-and-pony show a month ago, there has been no significant outreach to lower income people impacted by the law—of which I am aware. The impact on poverty-level street vendors is a real one. To punish them claiming they create a “hardship” for nearby businesses is both unproved and backwards. It's the equivalent of a local “austerity” tax to benefit those who already have more. Neo-liberal economics, Santa Cruz style.

On the street, two brave artists—Joff Jones and Alex Skelton have already been twice arrested for daring to display their art work outside the sacred blue boxes. Come down to Pacific Ave. Support them. Retake the public spaces that bureaucratic bandits have stolen under cover of law. Push back the culture sanitizers. The streets belong to all of us--the community.