

A Few Grains of Sanity Around the Right to Sleep ...Or Trumpist Bigotry—Santa Cruz Style?

Speech to Santa Cruz Community and City Council by Robert Norse 3-8-16

Some may know that Mayor Mathews has seriously cut back speaking time for the public—unprecedented in a legal change discussion, even more so when there's only one item on the evening agenda. Will any Council member move to restore the public's time?

Sanity around the Sleeping Ban issue has never been easy or acceptable. Trying to persuade those guided by bigotry, fear, or property-value priorities is a pretty hopeless task. Doubly so when homeless people are a political football transformed into a "crime" issue to boost aspiring "law and order" advocates to power.

Councilmember Lane has laid out many arguments for striking "sleep" from the law. His arguments simply relate to the economic and legal well-being of the City. You know: federal lawsuits, funding cutoffs, unnecessary police expenses, the failure of the "drive 'em out of town" policy. He does not talk about the rights of the poor. Let's face it, if anyone on this Council cared about rights for the poor, there'd be housing, campgrounds, accessible public restrooms at night, rent control, speculation taxes and a boot in the butt for the featherbedding for consultants, cops, and costly developers.

HUFF has been fighting for years against the Sleeping Ban and we support the changes, ultimately small as they are. And they are small. Lane goes to great length to reassure the paranoid prejudiced that police will continue to have all the tools they need to harass the ragged, the wretched, the traveler, the hippie. And, of course, he's right.

There will be no "welcoming spots" for homeless folks if "sleep" is removed—parks are closed at night, greenbelts are patrolled by officials with ticket books and stay-away orders, all walk-in shelters are closed, the HLOSC is gated, guarded, locked, ID-checked. Parks are being fenced off. Ghoulish-minded politicians are rattling jugs of needles as they seek to drag the City back into the Dark Ages of the Drug Wars.

HUFF members generally agree that these changes are insufficient—sort of like allowing blacks in a segregated town to be allowed rights in very limited areas. Homeless are to be allowed to sleep on the sidewalks and in vehicles—if there are any legal places to park them at night after Mayor Mathew's decade long permit-parking campaign to criminalize those whose only home is a vehicle. Or David Terrazas's "No homeless in the parks at night" Stay-Away Orders extra-judicial law, unique to Santa Cruz.

Who have been targeted? Who impacted? Last summer in the 1000 citations that were released—it was homeless people. More recently? We don't know. SCPD Police Chief Vogel, City Attorney Condotti, and City Manager Bernal have all stonewalled—refusing to release the information. Mayor Mathews did nothing to assure this information was available before this meeting.

The costs? Who knows? Bigots with badges like Deputy-Chief Steve Clark stoked fear and anger two years ago here. He claimed homeless were the main "crime" problem. Of course "sleeping" was the major "crime"---convenient for fattening police budgets, wasting public funds, harassing the vulnerable, and pleasing those favoring gated communities.

This vitriolic world view requires strong community action to restore basic civil rights to homeless people. I encourage those with conscience and caring to join activists at the HUFF table at Project Pollinate noon Saturday after next March 19th in San Lorenzo Park. Meanwhile a vote for Lane's proposal is the bare minimum.

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