

# Public Record Denial, Staff Stonewalling, and the Public Interest

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

Public records are a way of holding public officials and unelected staff members accountable. Holding staff accountable can be more difficult than holding Council members accountable. Council members, mostly dependent on staff for information and assistance, are usually extremely if not excessively deferential to staff. The heads of staff are highly paid and usually appointed for life.

Earlier in this meeting, we saw an attempt by staff to usurp the Sister Cities Committee process—with the Mayor's consent—against the unanimous opposition of the Sister Cities Committee. Council, to its credit, has at least temporarily turned this staff move back. Staff has—after opposing and attempting to sideline the Comstock resolution last summer—has closed the only 24-hour restroom in Santa Cruz. The main problem there seems to be—according to workers—that homeless people in the midst of a nasty winter—sought shelter there.

I myself have tried to impact what are supposed to be public processes and found staff stonewalling information. Last year Public Works tried to put in a 24-hour ban on parking near the Coral St. homeless center, at the behest of homeless-hostile nearby businesses. After initially providing some information, Marlin Granlund refused to provide information, refer the issue to the Public Works and Transportation Commission, or respond in a professional manner.

More recently, the police department has erected unusual barriers to relatively simple requests for citation and arrest records—to prepare for this Council meeting. A request several months old has repeatedly been denied or ignored. I shall be discussing this issue in more detail later tonight. Is there class profiling in citations downtown against homeless folks—clearly.

Was their racial profiling by Officer Barnett several years ago—after viewing the department's own citations, yes. Barnett ticketed African-Americans at 7 times their frequency in the county's population downtown. Now, the SCPD continues to refuse to inform us of the race of the citations they have issued in the last three months. Do I think the SCPD is engaging in racial profiling or discrimination? I can't answer that question unless I get the data.

Attempts to get the information by appeals to Mayor Mathews and Chief Vogel have been unavailing. Finally, public access to both Council and to the public through public comment here is an important part of the public business. So when Mayor Mathews cuts back public comment time to 2 minutes for individuals and 3 minutes for groups, as she has announced she's doing tonight, where there is only one item on the agenda, and an issue of law is coming up for discussion—it's a serious matter.