

July 4 protests defused

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"Take Back the Town"

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SANTA CRUZ — Organizers of a scheduled July Fourth demonstration by the homeless have moved their protest from Santa Cruz City Hall in an effort to sidestep an announced counter-demonstration by a group of citizens calling themselves "Take Back the Town."

Homeless rights advocates and homeless persons from throughout California will instead meet at San Lorenzo Park before marching through town and gathering for a

rally at the County Government Center on Ocean Street. Earlier, the homeless protesters had planned a demonstration at City Hall. Two days later, the citizens group announced they would hold a demonstration at the same site.

"That decision was made as a way of avoiding the potential for conflict (with the counter-demonstrators)," said Sherry Conable, a community activist who has been acting as an intermediary between the homeless, the counter-demonstrators and the Santa Cruz Police

Department.

"It's both in the best interests of the homeless community and in the best interests of the city," she said.

Carolyn Busenhart, the leader of the "Take Back the Town" group, said "We don't want to have a confrontation, either. What they do doesn't affect us as all. Our purpose is to show the City Council and police that we support the ex-

isting laws," Busenhart said. "We may even be circulating a petition to make the laws a little tougher."

Busenhart estimated that 1,000 supporters of "Take Back the Town" would attend the group's rally. "I have received a total of 100 phone calls," she said. "It's just non-stop."

George Soles, organizer of the contingent of out-of-town homeless, is predicting 450 homeless demonstrators, moderators and observers at the County Center to protest the city's ban against camping among other issues.

"It's hardly a human wave," he

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Demonstrations

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said. "We're hoping that we keep it down to that number. It would be wonderful to have 5,000 people, but if you can't deal with it, that would be really irresponsible."

"Everyone is going to be held accountable for their behavior on July Fourth," Soles said.

Deputy Santa Cruz Police Chief Mike Dunbaugh said the conciliatory comments from both factions "don't change our law enforcement plans. We're treating both organizations the same," Dunbaugh said.

Fourth of July is traditionally one of the most trying days of the year for the SCPD. "It always has that potential, and sometimes it exceeds it," Dunbaugh said.

"We really think the county building is a bigger and better and more visible place" for the homeless demonstration, said Robert Norse, local advocate for homeless rights.

"We perceive the counter-demonstrators as looking for a fight, and even though we had our demonstration set up weeks ago, they moved right into the middle of it."

"We welcome genuine debate," Norse said. "We need nothing more than genuine debate on the sleeping ban, but dealing with false and inflammatory rhetoric on a hot Fourth of July seems a fruitless activity, if not a dangerous one," Norse said.

"We don't have to have them there. We don't want them there (at City Hall)," said Busenhart. "We're not following them around."

Soles, director of the Sonoma County Homeless Union, said both factions, ironically want the same thing.

"We both want to get rid of the homeless people. That's what we

have in common. When (the counter-demonstrators) feel they've been snookered and rush to the County Center," Soles said, "I hope they do so friendly."

The homeless demonstration will begin at noon in San Lorenzo Park, and march down Ocean Street to Broadway and then Laurel Street. The marchers will stop at the controversial "homeless table" in front of the Post Office at Front and Water streets before concluding with speeches and a rally at the County Center.

The "Take Back the Town" group will confine its demonstration to City Hall plaza, Busenhart said, beginning at 10 a.m.

Each bus containing out-of-town protesters will contain "non-violence trainers," Soles said. "We made it clear that every person that we recruited knew this was a non-violent protest," he said.

Conable said she became involved in attempting to avert potential confrontations between the two groups "because I'm concerned about homeless peoples' needs and I think we need to come up with caring and compassionate solutions. When you have two groups with different points of view yelling at each other ... meaningful discussions are difficult."

Mitch Snyder, the nationally known homeless activist from Washington D.C., was invited to the Santa Cruz protest but sent his regrets to Soles via fax.

"Because of equally intense battles here in Washington, I can't be with you in Santa Cruz ..." Snyder wrote. "Know that if it were at all possible I would be there."

"We are in solidarity with your efforts to decriminalize and then end homelessness in Santa Cruz ...and throughout the country."