Advocates for homeless vow action on food giveaways

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SANTA CRUZ — A tug of war over a pot of soup may lead to intensified confrontations between advocates for the homeless and the City Council. And activists here said they had enlisted the help of Food Not Bombs, a San Francisco group that has been involved in several confrontations there over food handouts.

The standoff over street food giveaways in Santa Cruz boiled over Tuesday when homeless advocates set up a pot of soup in front of City Hall during a council meeting. As the soup was served, police moved in and arrested four people, three on resisting-arrest charges and one on a charge of serving soup without a permit. All those arrested were released without bail several hours later.

Homeless advocates said the arrests were politically motivated and that it has increased tension between city officials and advocates.

"I frankly didn't think that there would be arrests," Robert Norris Kahn, a homeless advocate said. "I spoke with Mardi (Wormhoudt) about three weeks ago and I understood they were concerned about the Town Clock (food handouts). But she said she regarded the feeding at the City Council as a different matter — that it was matter of free speech."

"There was no such agreement," Wormhoudt said. "I thought the agreement was that they wouldn't serve soup any more, once the serving at the shelter was set up."

In November the homeless coalitions began serving free soup daily at the Town Clock at the top of the Pacific Garden Mall. That giveaway which was stopped after the County Health Department said the group didn't have proper permits. The City Council agreed to allow the group to serve food at the River Street homeless shelter.

Kahn characterized the arrests as foolish and inappropriate.

"Jaws were left hanging that police would do this — to make such a show over a pot of soup," he said.

He said the protestors would be stepping up their actions. He said the he and others had been meeting with a Food Not Bombs in San Francisco, a group involved with confrontational food handouts there which have resulted in arrests and disturbances.

Kieth McHenry, who said he is a Food Not Bombs member and who was at Tuesday's council meeting, said the group would be coming to support the local protesters.

"Definitely we will be bringing people down to serve food and see where we are needed," McHenry said Thursday night.

McHenry said the group is concerned with feeding the homeless, but that the issue is also political. He said the group would be willing to face arrests.

McHenry said, however, that Food Not Bombs does not seek confrontations.

Activists accused Wormhoudt of orchestrating the Tuesday arrests.

But the mayor said they came at the request of county health officials after the officials were contacted by police.

Wormhoudt said the officials were concerned about the possible spreading of hepatitis, which can be passed through improper food handling.

But activists are upset.

"People are already more frustrated and angry and they are becoming more angry," said Linda Lemaster, who was at the food handout. "People were hurt. (The protests) gave a sense of hope, but now many street people are falling back into feeling they are being made invisible and that they are the object of hostility."