

Capitola parking patrol cries 'foul'

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CAPITOLA'S "code-enforcement officers," most of whom write parking tickets in the Village area from wheelchairs, say the city is discriminating against them by refusing them vacation and holiday pay, sick leave and medical benefits.

Code-enforcement officers formed a bargaining committee to seek a better wage-and-benefit package last spring, but their efforts to negotiate have been ignored, said Ben Irao, a code-enforcement officer in Capitola for more than four years.

Instead of considering their proposal, which would have given them some benefits, put their wages on a par with parking-enforcement officers in other cities and allowed some of them to work full time, Irao said City Manager Steve Burrell came up with a proposal of his own.

Burrell proposed creating two 40-hour positions from the 130 hours a week budgeted for code-enforcement officers, leaving five officers to split the remaining 50 hours. Currently, six code-enforcement officers work between 20 and 30 hours a week, and the seventh, at his own request, works less than 20, Burrell said.

Burrell said yesterday that the code-enforcement officers had asked for two full-time positions, so he thought his proposal answered their request. However, Irao said it is unac-

ceptable because it would force two officers out of their jobs and leave fewer to fill in if an officer got sick.

"We viewed this offer as something that is not really good for us," Irao said, "and it's not good for the city."

Gary Klein, executive director of Community Resources for the Disabled, said the bargaining committee did not intend the city to take hours away from any officer, but to give any hours that might be added in the future to existing officers rather than create more part-time positions.

Capitola code-enforcement officers went for help to Klein's organization, which is mandated by the state to act as an advocate for disabled people, when they perceived the city was not willing to negotiate, Klein said.

Burrell said he has always been willing to negotiate with the officers and did not present his proposal as an ultimatum. He attributed perceptions to the contrary to a lack of communication.

"Everything is open to negotiation," he said.

Klein said, however, that there have already been "subtle retributions" against some officers for refusing to accept Burrell's proposal.

"It's not bigotry born of hatred," he said, "but it's the kind of thing where you take advantage of people."

Klein said the city has essentially told code-enforcement officers Capitola could not afford to pay them benefits, but Capitola is relatively wealthy, while Santa Cruz is facing financial difficulties, but still pays pro-

rated benefits to employees working 20 hours or more a week.

Medical benefits under such a program are usually equal to those full-time employees receive, he said, but vacation pay for a 20-hour-a-week employee would be half that received by a 40-hour-a-week employee; holiday pay would be for four hours per day rather than eight.

Capitola's code-enforcement

\$13.89 in Santa Cruz and \$10.99 to \$13.36 in Carmel, he said.

Burrell said he thought the code-enforcement officers did a good job for the city, but that their wages were based on the labor market rather than on the revenue they raise or the wages other cities pay.

"We will pay, and we have a responsibility to pay, what it takes to keep the work force

ficer whose chair had to be replaced recently paid for it himself after the city refused.

Burrell said the city recently approved repairs costing \$1,700 to one chair, and it's not inconceivable it would also pay for replacing a chair. The case Irao referred to had not previously been brought to his attention, he said, but he would check into it.

Another objection Klein raised to Burrell's proposal was that it sets requirements for the full-time positions which disabled officers like Irao could not physically meet.

He said the full-time officers would be required to clean, paint and oil parking meters as needed; install and remove parking meters and traffic counters; operate parking-enforcement vehicles as necessary; repair defective meters using small hand tools and collect coins from meters.

Burrell said that job description was meant to be a starting point, from which code-enforcement officers and the city could work out a compromise.

He said he still thought the issues raised by the code-enforcement officers could be resolved through negotiations.

Klein said officers had contacted a lawyer, but that they were also hoping to negotiate.

"We don't want to sue," he said. "We don't want to go to court if we can avoid it."

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—Gary Klein

Community Resources for the Disabled

officers are a valuable resource and should be compensated, said Klein, who worked nearly 10 years ago as one of the city's first disabled parking officers.

"They don't just give out parking tickets," he said. "Remember, they raise revenue, they give information and they're another eye of the police."

Irao said the officers are seeking not only benefits, but wage parity with other communities. Capitola's code-enforcement officers make \$8.55 to \$10.92 per hour, compared with \$9.81 to \$11.96 for the position in Watsonville, \$10.88 to

here," Burrell said.

Burrell said Capitola's code-enforcement officers have been getting annual wage increases similar to other city employees. He has proposed paying them pro-rated vacations, sick pay and holiday pay, but Capitola does not offer medical benefits to any of its part-time employees.

Irao said disabled officers have it tougher than parking-enforcement officers driving city-provided vehicles because they face the potential expense of replacing their wheelchairs. Capitola has paid for repairs on the chairs, Irao said, but an of-



Diane Varni

Officer Oscar Valdez writes a parking ticket in Capitola yesterday. Officer Ben Irao, who says wheelchair-bound officers' needs are being ignored, is in the background.