

Petition-drive leaders celebrate parole decision

By KATHARINE BALL
STAFF WRITER

Signature gatherers in the petition drive to stop the parole of Richard "Blue" Sommerhalder to Santa Cruz County reacted joyously yesterday to the news that the convicted rapist-murderer would not be returned here when he is released from prison Sunday.

"We won!" said a smiling Frank Jordan, a recreational-vehicle dealer who volunteered as the full-time coordinator of the petition drive for the past week.

"I'm glad I'm out of a job," Jordan said, adding the petition

drive, in which nearly 15,000 signatures were collected in six days, had "renewed my faith in my fellow man."

District Attorney Art Danner, who led the drive to keep Sommerhalder out of the county, said, "We are ecstatic" about the Department of Corrections decision to keep Sommerhalder out of both Santa Cruz and Monterey counties for his parole period, which will last a maximum of three years.

Danner credited the parole division's decision in some measure to the "overwhelming reaction" of Santa Cruz County residents, but also to declarations made by the rape victims of Sommerhalder and witnesses who testified against him.

"The victims and the witnesses are the real heroes in this," Danner said. "They took the time to make declarations of their fear of Sommerhalder." Making those declarations forced the victims to relive the trauma of the crimes, Danner said.

Sommerhalder was convicted of raping and murdering two women in 1976 and raping two others the same year. He served 8 1/2 years in prison, then was freed on parole to Monterey County about two years ago.

Almost immediately after his release, he threatened his parole officer and a Monterey County sheriff's deputy and was jailed again.

It is usual practice for criminals to be returned to the place where they committed their crimes to serve their parole. But the parole division makes exceptions to that rule when victims or their families or witnesses formally declare they still fear the criminal, or there is an obvious threat to the safety of the parolee.

Ron Pederson, a director of the Central Fire Protection District, said he had encountered a great deal of animosity toward Sommerhalder as he was out collecting signatures on the anti-parole petitions.

Pederson noted that Santa Cruz County is small, and said "an amazing number" of

people were friends of Sommerhalder's victims or their families.

Those people "are very hostile" to Sommerhalder, Pederson said. "They don't want him here almost to the point of militancy."

Pederson said he had collected 400 signatures against the Sommerhalder parole in one day, going door-to-door in Live Oak and the Santa Cruz Gardens area.

"Not one person refused to sign," Pederson said.

Even as Danner and Jordan were holding a press conference yesterday morning to announce the decision not to parole Sommerhalder here, people were still trickling in to the district attorney's office to sign the petitions. Others arrived with thick bundles of petitions on which they had gathered signatures.

"One of the strong points I want to make to the people of Santa Cruz county is: you made the difference," said Danner.

He said his office had daily telephoned the state's parole office with tallies of signatures collected and news of the declarations made by victims and witnesses.

Danner said the public outcry had evidently convinced the Department of Corrections that Sommerhalder's "chances for success on parole here were next to nil."

Monterey County District Attorney Michael Bartram, in a telephone interview, said he had also worked hard to discourage the parole division from placing Sommerhalder in Monterey County, since it was there he made his threats against his former parole officer and the deputy sheriff.

Bartram said he wanted to make sure Sommerhalder was not paroled to San Benito County, either, since the parole officer works there as well.

REFERENCE