

Needle boxes approved

Syringe-disposal system
planned in public restrooms

By **DAN WHITE**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Parks clean-up crews and advocates for addicts are hailing the city's decision to put disposal boxes for used syringes in a dozen public restrooms.

After no discussion Tuesday, the council unanimously approved the plan, which will cost the city about \$900. The steel padlocked boxes will be in bathrooms at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, the Louden Nelson Center, Main Beach and the Municipal Wharf.

Heather Edney of the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange, a non-profit agency that lets intravenous drug users exchange dirty syringes for clean ones, said, "This means people understand it's a public health issue and nothing more. It's not about morality. It's not about whether people should or should not use drugs."

But the council decision was met with harsh criticism from a spokesman for the Seaside Co., owner of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, the city's biggest tourist draw.

"This sends a horrible message about Santa Cruz to visitors and tourists," said Seaside's John Robinson, who also serves as a vice president on the county Conference and

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NEEDLE
EXCHANGE

Needle

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Visitors Council. "Would it make you comfortable to send your kid into a public bathroom at the beach? This is about making the city comfortable for drug addicts, not about making a clean and healthy city."

Robinson, who was not at the council session, said Seaside was not consulted about the proposal.

Nationwide, Santa Cruz's program is the first municipality to install boxes throughout a city. Rhode Island has a state program. The San Francisco, Minneapolis-St. Paul and San Jose airports and various Nevada casinos also have boxes.

The city parks department said it instituted the plan because seven Santa Cruz employees have been pricked by dirty needles since 1997. The parks department said no one was infected.

The Santa Cruz Needle Exchange hopes the plan will slow the spread of hepatitis C and HIV.

But advocates braced for criticism that such devices encourage heroin use in bathrooms, an argument they called unfair and misleading. No one spoke for or against the box plan at Tuesday's council session.

Last weekend, a heroin user identified by police as a Needle

Exchange client was found dead of an overdose in a portable bathroom downtown. Edney said the death was tragic, and that the program advises participants not to inject drugs in public restrooms "because if you overdose, there won't be anybody there to revive you."

Kathy Agnone, administrative assistant at the Louden Nelson Center and a member of the city Parks and Recreation Safety Committee, said improperly disposed syringes come from various sources, including illegal drug users, diabetics and those who inject vitamins.

City parks director Jim Lang said the containers are steel and padlocked with 7-inch tubes leading to a thick box. Once a needle is dropped into the tube, it would be impossible to fish it out.

The Needle Exchange will remove the needles and deliver them to the county, which will arrange to have them sterilized and ground up at a licensed facility.

According to the city parks department, most of the chosen box locations have a problem with improper needle disposal. Syringes wind up stuffed in garbage cans and toilets, although the Needle Exchange has a drop-off point and disposes of 20,000 needles per month.

In California, it is a misdemeanor to have a syringe without a prescription. Advocates say this law can make users anxious



Heather Edney, left, of the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange, and parks and rec employees Kara Snider and Brad Arbsland with one of the boxes to be placed in a dozen public restrooms throughout Santa Cruz.

to dispose of them quickly and unsafely.

The county health department is cooperating with Santa Cruz on

the pilot program. County health officer David McNutt said the program was a "great idea," though he said it will be important to see

whether people use the boxes.

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