

Guardian Angels to take transients under its wing

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By MARK BERGSTROM

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — The Guardian Angels, who patrol the subways of the South Bronx and other high-crime areas across the country, want to come here to protect the transients. Kind of like "Trollbuster Busters."

John McKim, national troubleshooter for the Guardian Angels, was scheduled to meet this afternoon with Police Chief Jack Bassett to outline plans to begin street patrols after the first of the year.

The Guardian Angels are coming in response to reports of beatings of transients, but McKim said the organization feels it can be of service for other reasons, including summer crowd control.

Bassett this morning said he would reserve judgment until he heard McKim's proposal, but he said he would be "skeptical" going into that meeting.

"If it's their intention to offer protection to the transients, I don't think the community will respond too well," Bassett said.

"If they intend to include the transients in their patrols, then they should realize that 80 percent of them (transients) are either mentally ill or alcohol or drug abusers."

McKim said the Guardian Angels hope to win the support of the Police Department, but, he said, experience has shown "that is not the kind of reception we get from most cities." In Northern California,

the Guardian Angels are active in San Francisco, Sacramento, Palo Alto and San Jose.

"We're going to state to him (Bassett) that we are starting a chapter. Period," McKim said.

He said he and other organizers will meet with civic and business leaders this week to discuss their plan. "We're looking at doing the actual recruiting — setting up a recruiting station — during the first few weeks of the new year," McKim said.

Patrols, he said, would be composed "totally of local people."

If local people want to get involved in crime prevention, "the best thing they can do is to report anything they see to the Police Department," says Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt.

"My sense of this is that it is an unnecessary escalation of a problem (violence against transients). We don't need another private citizens group providing protection," she said.

"The Police Department is the best agency to provide protection for all the citizens, because it is accountable to the public," said Wormhoudt.

Is the Police Department protecting the transients?

First, Bassett says he feels the problem of transient beatings has been blown out of proportion by the national media. "This (Guardian Angels' plan) is another spinoff of that national attention."

Beatings of transients happen all over, Bassett says. "They're called drug rolls."

In Santa Cruz, the term "Trollbusters" was coined and Bassett says he believes it's the term, not the beatings, which has grabbed the attention of the national media. Of all the assaults in the city, those directed against transients is a small percentage, Bassett says.

"The Police Department is offering police service to transients when the situ-

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ation is reported to us. It's much easier to protect people who are stationary, with respect to home and property, and to people who are trying to provide a level of protection for themselves."

Transients, he says, create danger by their own actions. "They place themselves in jeopardy constantly."

He says crimes against transients fall into two categories: crimes against property and crimes against persons.

"Their property is very much subject to theft because they take no steps to secure it.

"And, when you're drunk in front of people, or panhandle or urinate in public, you'll get a reaction. First, the police will put you in jail. Secondly, someone may strike out against you. Society doesn't condone that, but people still do it," Bassett says.

Attacks on transients are crimes of opportunity, he says. "If we see an attack on a transient, we will make an arrest. We made arrests in the so-called bazooka attack and in the Raul Lopez case. But, most of the attacks happen in isolated areas where the transients live."

Bassett says he thinks "it's nice" that a group like the Guardian Angels wants to help the transients. But, he said, "If they

are really interested in this community, they should address the problems of mental health and drug and alcohol abuse and help establish facilities to get them (transients) out of their living conditions and provide them with the long-term help they need."