

# Homeless <sup>1990</sup> proposal panned by state parks

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SANTA CRUZ — State parks officials are charging City Council members with deliberately skirting the rules by supporting a plan to reserve campsites for homeless groups.

"I'm concerned that a government agency would purposefully go out and circumvent another government agency's policies," said George Cook, district superintendent of the state Department of Parks and Recreation. "It's not that we're without empathy for the homeless, but the state parks are set up for recreational use, not residential use."

City Council members this week agreed to give a non-profit organization \$2,500 to test the feasibility of a plan to reserve 2 percent of the campgrounds in the county's five state parks for homeless people.

If the two-week trial run, which begins Monday, is successful, the council will be asked to consider paying up to \$45,000 to fund the program through the first week in November. At that point, the county's winter shelter program resumes, and the campgrounds wouldn't be needed.

Mayor Mike Rotkin said the fact that non-profit Housing Options would reserve only two campsites in each park for homeless people makes it clear there is no intention of taking over the campgrounds.

"We're not keeping some other people from being there," said Rotkin. "We're not just leaving people in the park."

The plan, developed by Housing Options coordinators Sherry Conable and Barbara Riverwomon, calls for no more than six homeless people in each campsite. If the council funds the full program, there would be room for 60 campers (two campsites per park).

During the peak season, which begins Monday, the parks don't allow campers to stay for more than a week, which is why Housing Options will rotate the homeless campers between parks.

Cook said state parks' guidelines prohibit organized groups from using campgrounds intended for individuals and families.

"The goal is to get as many sites as possible for a variety of people for recreational camping," said Cook. "This is more like residential camping."

But proponents of the plan said the rules are not that clear-cut.

"It feels to me like they're interpreting the rules in a discriminatory way," said Councilwoman Celia Scott, noting that homeless groups have been camping in the parks since December when the River Street campground was disbanded. "I don't see anything that prohibits people from paying other people's fees."

Conable also noted that senior citizens typically spend weeks and months on the road, using state and federal parks as residential facilities.

"Why don't homeless people have the same right?" she asked. "We're just looking for equal treatment."

She also said scouting groups book campsites routinely, and are not turned away, even though they are organized groups.

Cook acknowledged that this happens, but added, "When we have an obvious, concerted effort to subvert our policies, that's another matter."

In the wake of the council's decision on Tuesday, park officials are considering how best to deal with Housing Options' intention of using volunteers' credit cards to book sites for small groups of homeless people.

Cook noted, however, that many of the campsites already are booked through the summer on weekends

## Homeless plan

Continued from Page A1

and holidays. "It's possible they're going to have a difficult time providing campsites for their people."

Scott said the whole point of the two-week test run is for the council to find out if homeless people are interested in the program, and if it can be done within the rules laid down by state parks.

"I don't think anybody's trying to create problems," said Scott, adding that she hopes continued talks with parks officials will smooth over any concerns.

Conable said she was frustrated by park officials' refusal to budge from their position.

"I feel like we've done what we can to smooth the way and make this work, and that's not being acknowledged or respected," said Conable.

Conable pointed out that Housing Options has made concessions:

- Six homeless people will be in any of the 10 campsites, despite the fact that park rules allow up to eight.

- A list of all participants will be provided to rangers, even though other people who sign up for a campsite don't have to do this.

- Participants will receive a copy of park guidelines, as well as rules established by Housing Options.