

Surf rescue here left up to chance

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SANTA CRUZ — Given that Santa Cruz is a seaside community, it seems reasonable to expect that if someone is drowning off the coastline, a trained public safety officer will go in and pull out the victim.

Mayor Michael Rotkin believed that until just a couple of days ago. So did Santa Cruz Fire Chief Tony Pini when he came to town two years ago.

Truth is, after Labor Day, no city agency is responsible for making a water rescue.

The chances of someone surviving a fall into the bay depend upon a number of unpredictable factors.

The odds clearly were demonstrated shortly after 1 p.m. on Nov. 8 when an intoxicated Santa Cruz man slipped off the rocks below West Cliff Drive near Merced Avenue and was swept some 20 to 30 yards offshore.

A passer-by called in the alarm and Santa Cruz police and fire units quickly headed for the scene.

But, neither of those agencies is responsible for sending someone into the water and, historically, the Fire Department has had a policy that its firefighters do not leave the shore.

When acting Capt. Bill Starrs heard the alarm at the westside fire station, he ran to his car and grabbed his swim fins before jumping on the engine and heading for the scene. Starrs is trained in water rescues and has lifeguarding experience.

Like others heading to help, Starrs knew there is no lifeguard service in Santa Cruz between Labor Day and Easter weekend. If the victim were to be rescued, Starrs might have to bend policy and go in the water.

When the fire engine reached the scene, a police officer was standing on the cliff trying to throw a lifeline to the victim. He
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manager of the shuttle program.

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was thrashing about and, according to the police report, "could not save himself."

Starrs radioed his division chief, Bill Reedy, who was responding to the scene from the downtown station, and reported a victim drowning about 20 yards offshore. Reedy decided to allow Starrs to make the rescue, which he did.

"There's no question in my mind the victim would have drowned otherwise," Reedy told The Sentinel.

Not only was the 32-year-old man so intoxicated he could not swim, but the current was pushing him toward an outcropping of rocks. One crack against those rocks and there could have been no rescue.

The fact that the victim was rescued was only because Starrs was on duty that Monday afternoon.

What if he had fallen into the water the day before or the day after, when Starrs was not on duty?

Reedy says he would not have sent another firefighter into the water. He only sent Starrs because he has lifeguarding experience and is well qualified.

Had it been another day, Reedy says he would have ordered calls be made to lifeguard headquarters on the wharf and to the Harbor Patrol. But, there would have been no guarantee that the Harbor Patrol could reach the scene in time or that a summer-only lifeguard might be hanging around on the wharf.

Just by chance, there was a lifeguard on the wharf on six occasions last winter and six rescues were made.

Mayor Rotkin, when told of the Nov. 8 rescue scenario, said he was "surprised" to learn no agency had water rescue responsibility in the winter. He said, like others, he "assumed" it was somebody's job to rescue the victim.

Fire Chief Pini said he, too, assumed there was an organized water rescue service when he came to Santa Cruz.

He says the Fire Department since "has looked into developing a program of

water safety. But, the problem is we're just able to take care of emergencies on land."

Even if such a plan were developed, sending one or two firefighters into the water would disable an engine company's ability to respond to a fire, the department's major responsibility.

Should water rescue responsibility be a part of the fire service, anyway, is a larger question. Should it be a function of the Police Department?

The city assigns the responsibility to the Parks and Recreation Department whose lifeguards made some 700 rescues during the summer months.

But, that service is provided only between Easter weekend through Labor Day. The majority of drownings in Santa Cruz occurs during the months there is no lifeguard service.

The situation during those winter months is "scary," says Lifeguard Capt. Al Mitchell. For the past two years, he has proposed to the city Parks and Recreation Department that lifeguards be hired on winter weekends and holidays. Providing additional service on those 60 days, Mitchell says, would cost the city about \$6,000. Both times his proposals were rejected at budget time.

City Councilmember Mardi Wormhoudt told The Sentinel the City Council never saw those proposals. She said she would like to.

The only council discussion of ocean safety, she says, "has been the enormous cost of providing lifeguard service from May to September."

This past summer, the city moved into the beach equipment rental business as a means to help pay that cost.

The Sentinel also has learned that the city lifeguards have been discussing a proposal to form a volunteer water rescue team for winter months, if the city will pay their insurance costs.

Both Wormhoudt and Rotkin say they'd like to hear more about that, too.

"Some sort of protection, however organized, is critical," says Wormhoudt.