

SC scraps camping program

Homeless - 1990

By KAREN CLARK
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SANTA CRUZ — Too few campers and too many obstacles left the City Council with no inclination to continue the much-maligned homeless camper program in local state parks.

"I've been really saddened and sobered by the reaction of some segments of the public," said Councilwoman Celia Scott, adding that she has seen the "extraordinary depths of fear and hatred of the homeless in this state."

Council decries 'prejudice' against homeless

Her comments were echoed by other council members, but none could justify continuing a program that had attracted only 12 campers during its trial period.

A full program would have cost up to \$45,000 to keep some 60 campers in the five state parks in Santa Cruz County through the first week in November, when the winter shelter program begins.

The low turnout during the test period wasn't the

only reason council members wouldn't commit to a full program. They also were faced with vows from state parks officials that they would wage a legal battle to end any attempt to allow organized groups to use individual campsites. That, they said, was a circumvention of park rules.

Despite this dispute with state parks officials, Barbara Riverwomon, a coordinator for Housing Options,

4-10-90
the group that put together the homeless camper program, praised individual rangers for treating participants with respect and fairness.

She attributed that attitude to Chief Ranger Bob Culbertson, who made it clear homeless people were welcome to camp, as long as they made their own reservations just like everyone else.

Riverwomon was not as happy with the response of some residents from around the state who called and wrote to complain about being forced to camp next to

Please see HOMELESS — BACK PAGE

Homeless program

Continued from Page A1

homeless people.

"I realize ... how strongly feared and hated homeless people are," said Riverwomon. "We're in danger of creating a class of untouchables in our society."

Riverwomon pointed out that the program would have taken up only 10 campsites out of 564 available in the county. "The program was designed to serve people who are not substance abusers, who are not violent."

But officials from the state Parks and Recreation Department opposed the program because they believed it was an illegal attempt to use recreational facilities for residential purposes.

"It doesn't make sense for the city to support it at this time," said Mayor Mike Rotkin, adding that he had found "incredible prejudice out there ... (and) a large number of people who assume every homeless person is a child molester, which is ridiculous."

No formal vote was needed to discontinue the homeless camper program. The council did rededicate itself

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— Celia Scott, councilwoman

to trying to find a year-round facility for homeless people in Santa Cruz.

Members also noted that staff is expected to finish a report in early May that details all the homeless services available in the area. The report will be used in part to wring money from the federal government to help close gaps.