

No Easy Cures for Drug Park

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The local homeless population may be driven out of the downtown area, left to distribute themselves between a few public domains or be put to work in out-of-town "homeless camps" if any of the recommendations advanced at a recent public hearing are adopted. Such was the bounty of bright ideas tossed about in a meeting of the downtown advisory commission to the Santa Cruz City Council.

Although no plan surfaced that was clearly feasible or affordable, the crux of the matter was obvious. North Pacific Avenue and Pacific Garden Mall business owners want a solution to the "bunch of drug-dealing bums" that, in one owner's words, are scarifying away downtown shoppers.

"Yes, we could be successful" in routing "streetpeople" and drug deal-

ers out of Scope/Scribner Park at the north end of the Pacific Garden Mall, said Santa Cruz Chief of Police Jack Bassett in response to complaints from area business owners. "But I'm a little concerned as to where that population would be transplanted... [since] it would be at the expense of the surrounding areas."

The hard fact, voiced by Bassett and members of the downtown commission, is that you can't solve the homeless problem by redirecting loiterers from one spot to another. Bassett cited a direct "cause and effect" relationship between security measures recently taken at the San Lorenzo and Laurel parks in Santa Cruz and increased activity elsewhere. "If you build a wall around Scope Park," concurred commission chair William Rubel, "then you make

something happen somewhere else."

Some speakers at this public hearing went so far as to chastise the local homeless for "making little if any contribution to the city." Crepe Place owner Gary Keeley even suggested that the city plant grass in this concrete park in order to justify a sprinkler system that could go on and off at whim.

The consensus, however, was that the city needs a day shelter. A day shelter would give homeless people a place to go when the local night shelters close; it would alleviate the strain on downtown businesses; and it would unmask drug dealers who have taken to "hiding behind the homeless population," in commission member Ron Prilliman's words.

The exact configuration of such a shelter, however, is open to inter-

pretation. If the testimony from public speakers is any gauge, it could be anything from a "workfare" concentration camp to an idyllic indoor-outdoor locale away from the downtown area. Funding, an agreeable location and a commitment from the city council are only a few major questions that remain unanswered.

The fate of the park also remains in a state of flux. Merchants scheduled to open a grill in the old Right Livelihood/Common Ground Cafe quarters next to the park have their sights set on a plaza for public eating. John Hicks of the soon-to-be Garage Grill suggests that the park could be cleaned up with an outdoor patio. Table space on the patio could be split between that business and the public.

Others have tossed around plans to

pool city and state funds to renovate the nearby stairwell and create an extended public park from the Mission Adobe at the top of the hill to Scope Park at the bottom.

But for the time being homeless people have the simple right to hang out in public property. "It's not illegal to just be someplace," offered commission member and Bookshop Santa Cruz owner Neal Coonerty. Coonerty suggests that the police should focus on illegal acts: drug dealing, panhandling, public urination and the lot. However, "Scope Park is not a sacrificial land," he concluded, "we can't just let it be the scourge of the area."