

# City considers public needle-dropoff boxes

'Virtually indestructible' containers would be installed in restrooms

*Drugs*  
By **DAN WHITE**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — The City Council is considering a plan to install vandal-proof containers in about a dozen public restrooms to hold used hypodermic needles.

Santa Cruz would be one of the first cities in the nation to install the boxes, known as Sharps containers, said Heather Edney, executive director of Santa Cruz Needle Exchange.

Edney said these receptacles protect the public from potentially disease-spreading syringes while encouraging needle users to dispose of them in a

safe manner. Seven city workers have been poked by hypodermic needles since 1997, said city parks director Jim Lang, who is proposing the installation of the boxes at a total cost of \$900-\$975.

If the City Council approves it, workers would install "virtually indestructible" metal containers in the public restrooms at the Municipal Wharf and Main Beach, the Loudon Nelson Community Center and the Civic Auditorium.

According to city parks, the boxes are steel and

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JIM LANG, CITY PARKS DIRECTOR

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can withstand a baseball bat attack.

Each box would have an extended tube coming out of the top. The dirty needle would be inserted into the tube. It would then fall into a

locked case. Santa Cruz Needle Exchange would monitor and dispose of the biohazard containers.

"There will be no human contact with the syringes," Lang said.

Lang said the cost to the city would be about \$75 per box. Edney said the boxes would be

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installed in about a dozen bathrooms. If approved, the project would end up costing the city between \$900 and \$975.

Edney said she hoped the overdose of a man, found dead this weekend in a downtown portable restroom, doesn't diminish the chances of the council approving the program. The man was a Needle Exchange client.

She said she initially predicted the box proposal would sail through without a hitch. "Hopefully they are not going to vote against it because of that. He happened to be using in that bathroom. That is not one of the bathrooms where we are

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going to put a Sharps container."

She said it would be a mistake to say that offering a safe disposal area for dirty needles somehow encourages drug use. "My response is always this: You can buy a syringe, a dirty one, for \$2 on the street. People will shoot up whether or not we provide syringes."

The council will address the issue during its 1:30 p.m. session today at 809 Center St., Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz Needle Exchange calls itself a harm-reduction program designed to slow the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C, and offers exchange for needles on a "one-to-one basis." The nonprofit agency also offers anonymous AIDs testing, does sex-worker outreach and offers drug-treatment referrals.

Contact Dan White at  
[dwhite@santa-cruz.com](mailto:dwhite@santa-cruz.com).