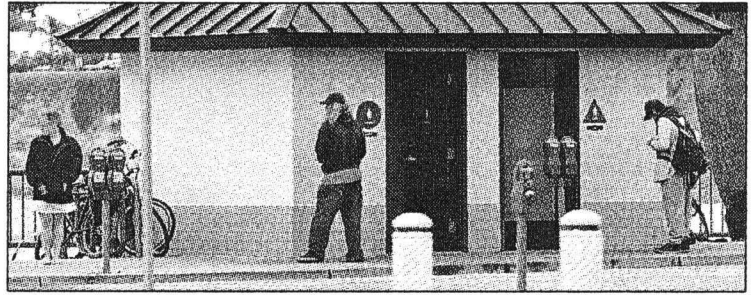


Neighborhood Watch

Recent crime sparks concern near Cowell Beach, Depot Park



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

ABOVE: Just steps away from Main Beach in Santa Cruz and the area's biggest tourist draw, the railroad tracks lead under the trestle and into a wooded area that has become a magnet for vagrants, drug deals and most recently the Nov. 16 beating death of a homeless man. TOP: The cement steps and restrooms at Cowell Beach have become a hangout spot.

Crime + Criminals 2000

By STEPHEN BAXTER

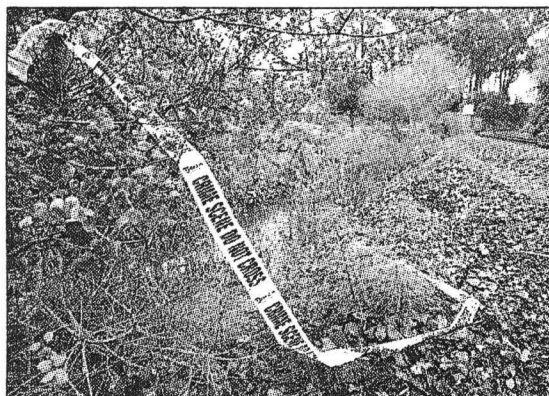
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SANTA CRUZ — For Vickie Mauga, manager of Beach Liquors, keeping an eye on the scruffy looking men across the street is part of her daily routine.

When she opens her small shop near the corner of Beach Street and Pacific Avenue each morning, she squints out the window to size up the transients who hang out near the steps to Cowell Beach.

"That's the first thing I do is scout out over there," Mauga said. "I keep an eye outside because I want people to feel comfortable."

SEE WATCH ON A2



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Police tape still marks the spot where a homeless man was beaten to death by five others Nov. 16.

IF YOU GO
PUBLIC SAFETY
COMMITTEE

WHAT: Santa Cruz City Council committee will discuss growing problem with drugs, homeless camps and other crimes on the Westside and in the beach area.

WHEN: 5:30 p.m.
Dec. 17

WHERE: Council Chamber, 809 Center St.

WATCH

Continued from A1

Down the railroad tracks from her shop, a 51-year-old homeless man was beaten to death by five other transients on Nov. 16.

On Sept. 21, a 19-year-old Gilroy man was stabbed near Beach and Pacific after a group of teens and young men who asked him his gang affiliation. Suspects were arrested in both cases.

In light of those crimes and syringes found on the beach and in public restrooms near the Cowell Beach parking lot, some merchants and residents are calling for more thorough police patrols there and at the edges of Depot Park.

"It's gotten so bad," said Mike Kurre, a 57-year-old who works at Cowell's Beach Surf Shop at Beach and Pacific. "I've even had a few people say, 'I'm going to Capitola where they don't have these problems.'"

Employees at a few shops said they often watch police drive by or ride by on motorcycles. Yet officers often don't stop to check the men for drugs or have them move along.

"Sometimes I even stand here and watch drug deals," Mauga said, pointing to the parking lot outside her shop.

POLICE PRESENCE

Santa Cruz Deputy Police Chief Steve Clark said officers often drive by on their way to other calls for service. Officers on evening and late-night shifts have been told to get out of their cars and walk the beach on patrol, he said.

Parks staff usually walk along the train tracks near Depot Park daily, or an officer rides on it with an ATV. An officer also has been assigned to manage recent



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Vickie Mauga is the manager of Beach Liquors.

drug problems around Cowell Beach, Clark said.

Clark believed more transients were near the beach in recent weeks because they recently have been kicked out of Grant Street Park, Pogonip and the Highway 1 and 17 interchange. Groups tend to migrate, and police often recognize the same faces, he said.

"It's disgusting to see that these people are hijacking our natural resources and making them drug hideouts," Clark said.

He hoped more people would report drug deals and describe suspects and their cars to police. Even if an officer can't respond immediately, police can record crime and might recognize suspects or cars later, Clark said.

"I know that we're doing additional foot patrols," he said.

Yet with a record pace of 95,000 calls for service so far this year, "There's not always time to walk all the locations."

Police also noted that busting people for minor drug

offenses typically lands them in jail and court for a brief period. A few days later, they are back on the streets.

CITIZEN ACTION

Because of recent reports and a YouTube video of trash and heroin users on the Cowell's rocks, Clark said police have discussed closing Cowell Beach at night.

That change would give police more opportunity to kick out transients.

Police also have talked to Dream Inn leaders about marking the hotel's property lines and potentially restricting access.

Police encouraged residents and business leaders to attend a Public Safety Committee meeting Dec. 17.

The meeting will take on beach crime and potential solutions at 5:30 p.m. at the Santa Cruz City Council Chamber, 809 Center St.

At Beach Liquors this week, employees said the crowd of transients changed through the years from older "hobos" to more aggressive young drug users.

During the summer, Mau-

ga told a man she wouldn't sell beer to him and took it from him at the counter. He struck her hand and tried to grab the beer.

She called police, who apprehended him down Beach Street.

"That shouldn't happen," Mauga said of the confrontation. "I don't think you should ever come to work and feel scared."

Tourists also have noticed problems.

Thursday morning, a group of transients gathered under the West Cliff Trestle. One woman wore disheveled overalls and acted erratically while asking passersby for money.

Ingrid McGee, a 76-year-old who was visiting family in Santa Cruz, said she had noticed many of the homeless while walking around town. She looked at West Cliff Trestle with trepidation.

"I'm kind of leery of walking down there," she said.

Follow Sentinel reporter Stephen Baxter on Twitter at [Twitter.com/sbxaxter_sc](https://twitter.com/sbxaxter_sc)