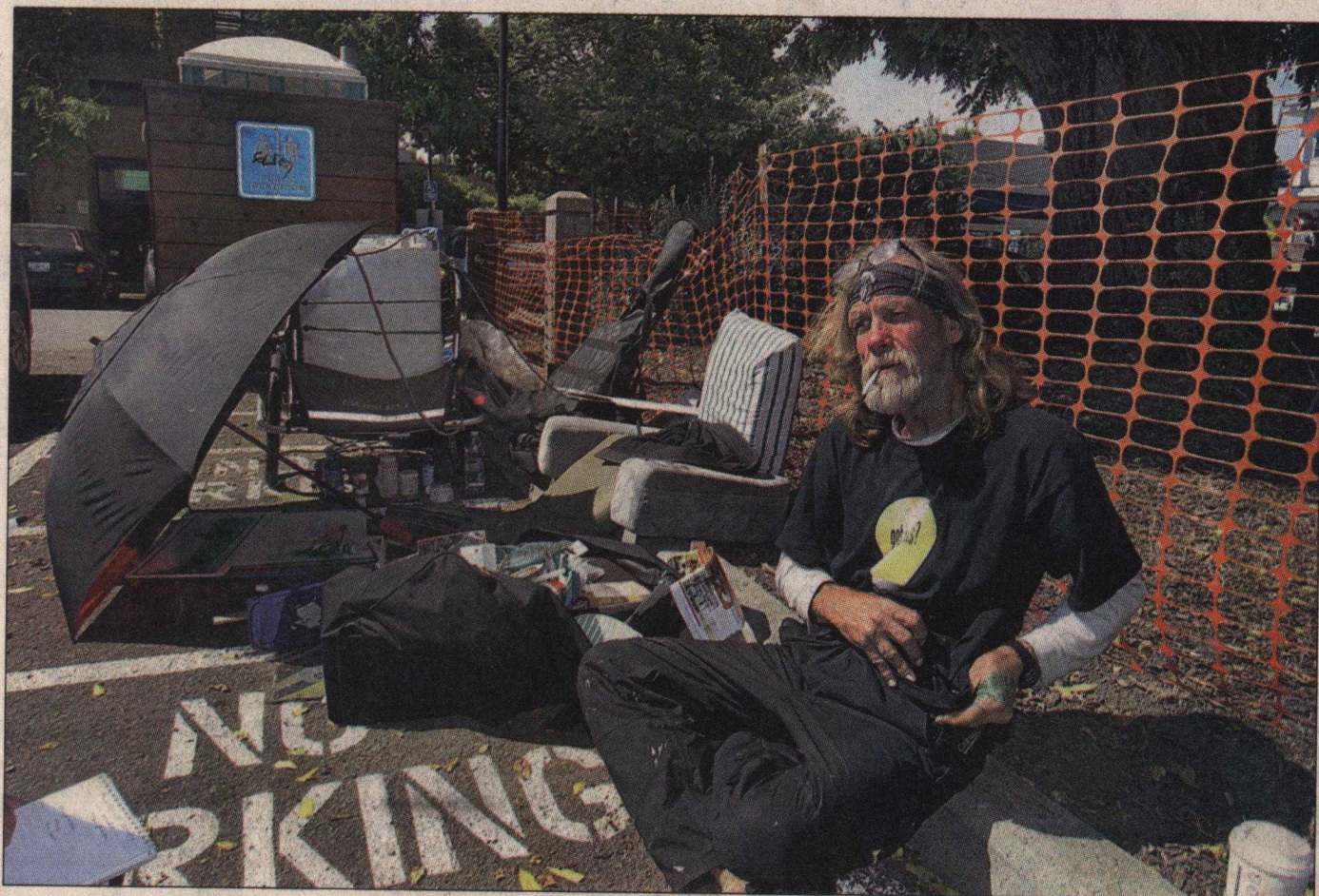


CITY SEEKS PUBLIC BATHROOM SOLUTIONS



PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Michael "Dreamcatcher" Ohre says he's often inconvenienced by people using the public restrooms for the wrong reasons, such as drug use.

Homeless

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Santa Cruz's facilities face gaps in service

By Jessica A. York

jjyork@santacruzsentinel.com
@ReporterJess on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » When Michael "Dreamcatcher" Ohre walks into one of downtown Santa Cruz's public restrooms, the artist has taken to announcing his arrival.

"I have to wait all the time for someone to wake up or pull the needle out," said Ohre, sitting on a curb next to the Locust Street Parking Garage. "About 50 percent of the time I walk in there and someone's using (drugs). So, when I enter the garage, I yell, 'Get out of my bathroom.'"

For those without a home, regular place of work or enough disposable income to casually spend money at a retail establishment, finding a public bathroom in Santa Cruz and beyond

is something of an art. Therein lies a vicious circle: People living on the streets become highly dependent on access to public bathrooms, which are often closed for repair or delayed in opening on a given day. Those without access are then faced with the option of doing their private business in public, many keeping empty plastic bottles handy for quick relief. When human waste is left in more public areas — in front of downtown businesses, along sidewalks and the San Lorenzo River levee, in back alleys — the incidents often cause a domino effect of repercussions and more stringent rules, rather than solutions, local homeless advocates say.

The homeless are not Santa Cruz's only population that seeks regular access to clean,



A woman uses a downtown parking garage restroom to change clothes. Vandalism of public restrooms and portable toilets in downtown Santa Cruz is forcing homeless people to relieve themselves outdoors.

safe facilities when one of humanity's most basic needs arise. Santa Cruz resident Linda

Cover, who volunteers in local outdoor cleanup efforts, **SERVICES » PAGE 5**

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including weekly San Lorenzo River levee-focused efforts, takes particular issue with the state of the city's only 24-hour port-a-potty, at Laurel and Front streets.

Last week, while passing the stall, a peek inside showed Cover graffiti-scrawled walls, scorched and melted plastic and piles of toilet paper strewn inside and out. Cover said she considers herself a "pro-toilet" person who hopes to see more public facilities available, rather than less. The Laurel and Front port-a-potty, however, Cover believes was "meant to fail."

"It was begrudgingly put in. It's a port-a-potty, as opposed to something that could be halfway decent, like the ones at the Boardwalk," Cover said. "And they allowed that sheer quantity of graffiti to pile up in there. That did not happen overnight."

The outdoor facility, first installed around January 2014, is owned by a private company the city contracts to clean for \$100 per day per unit, five times a week, according to city Public Works Director Mark Dettle. Comparatively, the city's parking garage bathrooms are cleaned every two hours by city Public Works staff. The bathrooms' annual costs include \$25,000 on vandalism repairs, \$84,000 on staffing and supplies, he said.

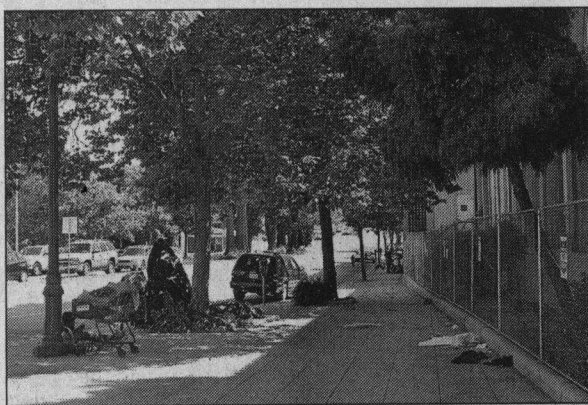
About a year ago, the city added two additional downtown public port-a-potties, at Cedar and Union streets parking area and the Lincoln Street parking lot, both open overnight from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., when the garage bathrooms are closed.

Troubled waters

The new port-a-potties came last year during a larger Santa Cruz City Council discussion on how to address the needs of the public in the most effective way. Some proponents of the bathrooms have pointed to a need to offer some dignity to the poverty stricken, while others say the city needs to address issues of public defecation.

In the past year, public restrooms at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor and Santa Cruz City Hall have been put under lock and key due to vandalism and plumbing-related concerns. The City Hall courtyard was posted with restrictive use rules in May, in part due to costs and exposure to public urination and defecation, city officials said at the time. Santa Cruz Public Libraries Downtown branch staff report regular difficulties with bathroom patrons.

A pilot program in recent years to keep parking ga-



Homeless people can be seen on nearly every downtown Santa Cruz block, adding to the public restroom issue.

rage facilities open 24 hours was shuttered by the city Public Works Department due to rising costs for security, repairs and staff safety concerns. The additional port-a-potty sites also were initiated last year as a pilot program, set to reviewed in six months to a year.

During the council's most recent May and June budget talks, city funding was set aside for a bundled list of homeless solution-oriented projects, including establishing more public restrooms and showers. The council's ad-hoc Homeless Coordinating Committee report rates establishment of the new facilities as having a "very high" human and social impact.

"Enables individuals to safely maintain basic hygiene and human needs and dispels stigma associated with visual uncleanness," the city report states. "Improves overall public health for entire community."

Doing business

The city's 8-year-old Visitor Restroom Program, which pays downtown businesses a \$400-a-month stipend to keep their restrooms available to the general public, has been whittled down from three to one business over the years.

Bookshop Santa Cruz on Pacific Avenue is the last business standing, though more businesses are welcome to take part, said Julie Hendee, city development manager. The effort, said Bookshop's Casey Coonerty Protti, costs the business about \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year in maintenance, supplies and repairs. Coonerty Protti said the majority of the public is very respectful of their restrooms, and even offers to contribute financial donations to offset the store's costs. Some issues arise, however, with people washing up, stuffing objects in the toilets, graffiti, drug use and other vandalism, she said.

Coonerty Protti, who serves on the city's Downtown Commission, said her father Neal Coonerty, a former Santa Cruz mayor and county supervisor, decided years ago that public bathroom access was a basic necessity for downtown visi-

tors. Public bathrooms also make good business sense, she said.

"There was this one moment where he (Coonerty) was at another business and somebody asked to use the bathroom for that business and that person said, 'No, we don't have bathrooms. You need to go across the street to Bookshop Santa Cruz,' Coonerty Protti said. "So, he started using the phrase, 'If it takes a full bladder to get somebody into Bookshop Santa Cruz, I'll take it.' As a business, you spend tons of marketing dollars trying to figure out, how do you get people to want to come into your store, and they do because they want to use your bathroom. It's not necessarily a bad thing for business."

Former Visitor Restroom Program participants Pizza My Heart and Cafe Gratitude phased out over the years, the former after a remodel, the latter due to "major vandalism," Hendee said.

'Sabotage'

Ohre, who lives on Santa Cruz's streets, said that at times the various public bathroom closures can seem coordinated or even malicious.

"If we just had a bathroom attendant like they do in other places — they have a bathroom attendant at City Hall. They have an attendant at the library all day that it's open — it gets sabotaged, but not as much," Ohre said of the port-a-potties. "At least twice a month there's something that has to be fixed in all of these bathrooms, even the port-a-potties. I don't know what it is."

Homelessness issues advocate Brent Adams has taken the state of Santa Cruz's public bathrooms to heart. He launched a Facebook page dedicated to the "Downtown Santa Cruz Bathroom Task Force," recruiting a team of volunteers that at one point included former Councilman Micah Posner, to create their own cleaning shifts for the port-a-potty at Laurel and Front streets. After the city upped its cleaning contract agreement with the bathroom's vendor, Adams has con-

tinued regularly posting photographs, sometimes of human waste spread around the downtown, other times of the inside of the bathrooms.

As a volunteer, Cover said she believes whatever the reason that Santa Cruz's public bathrooms face damage issues, "you can't operate on a knee-jerk response."

"There are cities throughout the world that honor that basic human need. You do need to address that," Cover said. "If it requires cleaning up, which it does, you just need to do it. It's part of the fact that we're a tourist town and you can't just say, well, I give up, there's all these issues and needles or whatever. You just need to continue to clean this up."

Obstructions

Even where Santa Cruz does offer clean, functioning public bathrooms, there are limitations on their success, said Santa Cruz's Food Not Bombs founder Keith McHenry. Those who are homeless and carrying all of their possessions need a "buddy" when they go to the bathroom, to watch that their possessions do not get stolen, especially if they are traveling by bicycle — which are banned from inside the parking garage bathrooms, he said.

"A lot of people are just saying, why are they going to the bathroom outside," McHenry said. "It's because they can't get in."

The Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency raised the alarm about increasing reports of Hepatitis A infections throughout the county, with a particular focus on the homeless community. In addition to conducting community vaccination clinics and upping their outreach efforts, county officials urged the public to wash their hands frequently, especially after using the bathroom and before handling food.

McHenry said access to clean water for washing up is difficult in the homeless community. Food Not Bombs, which holds weekly free meal distributions, has purchased a mobile hand washing station in recent weeks to complement hand sanitizer and food preparation gloves already on hand, McHenry said.

"I understand the ongoing dilemma, the homeless do not have the privacy of a personal place to take care of private needs so some will improvise to meet their needs, and unfortunately private behavior (like bathing or using drugs) is not acceptable in a public location and creates problems for other users of the facility," Dettle, the Public Works director, said of restrictions on use of public bathrooms with running water.