

More studies won't help homeless issue

S.C.Co. - Homeless

THE SANTA CRUZ environment is an attractive nuisance for street people, the homeless, the "new poor," or whatever term that fits your fancy. If one of every 100 persons in our community fits that description, as a recent \$11,000 study on the issue states, then we certainly have our fair share.

But if there are normally 400 street people in the city of Santa Cruz that has a population of more than 40,000, then those figures don't wash. The value of this "Streetpeople and Straightpeople" examination is open to question, especially when it is uncertain whether local officials are ready to take any action to alleviate the situation.

Burned once in a police vs. transient court procedure, our leaders seem reluctant to take a stance encouraging enforcement of existing ordinances that might dissuade drifters who see Santa Cruz as a mecca. Indeed, there's more talk about providing shelter and food for many of these persons who are voluntarily poor than promotion of strictly enforcing laws that could reverse this laissez faire attitude.

Are we encouraging transients to become transient-residents? Some City Hall followers who hold that thought contend it would have been better to spend that \$11,000 by giving some of these free-loaders one-way tickets on the \$98 airline specials to the East Coast.

But there's another side of the story to this multi-faceted problem. And it is a problem, perceived or real.

Our pleasant weather is a built-in magnet which pulls street people to pleasantness, much like it does to Hawaii and the Southwest.

They deal in drugs, mostly marijuana, but the rate of exchange in a week probably is equal to that which might be traded in one six-hour, high-class party. Put the "new poor" in business suits and dresses, and a visual part of the irritation might go away. Or how about just not talking about them, those 400 of 40,000?

The subjects are human beings, many of them without the mental capacity to decide for themselves. They need help. A statement was made during a Board of Supervisors' March 19 hearing on a proposed camping ban that once there were 55,000 patients in state mental hospitals. Since they've been virtually closed down the number has been reduced to 5,000.

On the other hand, many others are straight people content with a street-people label. They are educated, between 20 and 35 years of age and have the ability to work for a living. They don't deserve sympathy for they only erode attention that should be directed toward the truly needy.

This mix of clientele that wanders about makes an acceptable solution difficult to attain. It will take a combination of stricter law enforcement and identification of those who need assistance to solve this problem that is festering in our community, as well as others.

The city shouldn't have to go through another \$50,000 study to tell us that. The county's look into the so-called "undesirable transient element" in 1970 told us as much, and it now has been repeated with another \$11,000 study.

A firm but fair approach that necessitates more than what one city can offer is needed to address this issue.