

Council wants human rights panel

By JOAN RAYMOND
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — City Council members agreed Monday the city needs a new commission on human rights to address discrimination, but were stymied as to how to set up an effective commission.

After hearing public testimony detailing stories of discrimination — particularly against homosexuals — council members endorsed the concept of a human rights, or human relations, commission and established a subcommittee to make specific recommendations Sept. 9. Subcommittee members are council members Arnold Levine, Jane Weed and John Laird.

The commission would be added to the city's list of 19 council-appointed committees, boards and commissions that serve as advisory bodies to the council and are staffed by city employees.

Council members made no budget decisions regarding the commission's establishment.

At least two council members made it clear a commission is not going to stop discrimination.

"To think that a commission will actually change things is erroneous," said Weed. "The purview of a commission, and even of this council, is somewhat limited."

Mayor Michael Rotkin added that no commission would "eliminate the need for organized and united grassroots efforts" to combat discrimination.

But Rotkin hoped the city's commission would have power, so that Santa Cruz would not become just "one more city with a human rights commission. We have to do something that really makes a difference."

Laird, the city's first openly homosexual mayor in 1983-84, had originally suggested the establishment of the human rights commission.

Councilman Joe Ghio pushed for a more specific proposal. Without clear direction from the council, said Ghio, the commission would be "an arena for frustration."

Laird suggested several options for the commission: to act as a neighborhood board to mediate disputes; to establish an awards program that would "encourage people to work

'We have to do something that really makes a difference.'

— Mayor Michael Rotkin

together and to end divisiveness"; drafting of a human rights ordinance "to state the basis for harmony in the city"; and education of police, firefighters and other city employees about "different cultures and lifestyles."

Rotkin said the commission should also have subpoena powers "to force people to come before a public body and answer reasonable charges as to what they've been up to."

Councilwoman Katy Sears-Williams said she, too, supported the commission.

But, noting her position as a political minority member, Sears-Williams objected to what she called "political discrimination."

Sears-Williams also took the time to note she is "the only woman, single-parent" on the council.

She added discrimination against AIDS victims "is something we have to deal with, because it will get a lot worse before it gets better."

But she maintained public testimony in support of the commission at Monday's public hearing was punctuated by comments that were discriminatory in nature.

Supporters of the commission were "employing discrimination in fighting discrimination," said Sears-Williams.

She said some of the comments had more to do with being "liberal, progressive and self-righteous" than in being concerned about human rights — "sometimes discrimination becomes more of an issue of political expediency than of human rights."

Sears-Williams said her view of the commission is that it would "look at what discrimination is ... that dark side of human nature that ought to be explored."

Council members heard testimony from 15 people representing such groups as New Jewish

Agenda, Gay/Lesbian Alliance, Lavender Guild, AIDS Project, American Civil Liberties Union, Freedom Democratic Caucus, Santa Cruz Action Network, a political committee that supported Laird's election, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons.

Noting all the white faces at the council podium, NAACP representative Richard Harris said, "there is very little or no voice for the black minority, as we can see in the makeup of the City Council." Harris also said there should be more blacks in city jobs.

Resident Charlotte Lyons testified she had been fired from her job as bookkeeper at a local private school because she had been working with AIDS patients. She declined to name the school.

Testimony included stories about homosexual men who were spat upon because they were holding hands in public and of discriminatory warnings to drivers in San Francisco "to roll up your windows, so that you don't get AIDS."

"Discrimination is certainly with us, and it will continue to be with us, but that doesn't mean we have to sit still for it," testified commission supporter Robert Lissner. "Discrimination in Santa Cruz has got to be dealt with. We've got to nip it in the bud."

Levine said he would like to "see this city reaffirm its statement of equal treatment for citizens," but noted "gay and lesbian individuals are only one (of many) segments of the population that need to have their civil liberties protected."

In a separate matter, council members took no action on a proposed human services commission to oversee the budgets of social-service programs.

The human services commission had been suggested by the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce as a way to keep tighter fiscal control and citizens' leverage over the program budgets.

But council members said they are satisfied with the existing budget system. Currently, the Finance Department reviews the budgets for the programs.

The council held a public hearing on the human services commission proposal, but no one came.