

Homeless a 'Cause to Die For'

Ben Lomond woman won't eat until politicians act

JANE IMLER WILL force local politicians to do something to help the homeless, or she says she's going to die trying.

Imler, a lifelong advocate for the homeless, has not eaten since Nov. 18. She vows to not eat until the county builds an emergency shelter to protect homeless people from winter's cold and rain.

"It's certainly a valid cause to die for," said Imler, who lives in a comfortable home in Ben Lomond. "Lives are being lost daily in the streets. We've seen it happen right here. We have children on the streets, pregnant women, elderly people."



GREG PIO

Jane Imler: No compassion from phony liberals

Imler arrived at her decision after months of watching local politicians spend a lot of time talking and no time acting to help the homeless.

"The more I worked with government officials and saw the community attitude, the more I began to see nothing would be accomplished through normal channels," said Imler, who was one of the key organizers of last year's Tent City project in Los Angeles.

"I would like to believe the majority of people care about their fellow Santa Cruzans, but for the politicians, it's just not politically expedient to do anything about it."

Imler said there are plenty of ways the county could open a temporary shelter until a permanent solution is found. Her suggestions include using one of the many county-owned buildings.

All she's seen is more resistance. A camping ban was recently enacted for the Ocean Street extension area, and plans for a shelter on Golf Club Drive fell through last week.

"It's a continuous assault," said Imler. "This year is worse than ever."

Shannon Casamo, another activist for the homeless, is not ready to starve herself to death, but she agrees nothing has been done to help the street people here.

"I don't think the local politicians want to do anything to help the street people," said Casamo. "I have seen no compassion from these phony liberals toward the street people. I really don't think they care."

"These politicians have a liberal image to maintain," added Casamo. "If we put enough pressure on them, they'll come around. They don't want to face it, so we're going to have to make them do it. People's lives are at stake."

One person whose life may be at stake is Barbara Ryan, a former Minnesotan who now lives under a walnut tree in a city neighborhood. Due to a medical condition, Ryan cannot keep a steady job, which has forced the middle-aged woman to the streets.

"I don't want to cast stones at

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anybody, but I haven't seen any action," said Ryan. "I'm sick of words, so sick of words. You can say all kinds of nice things that people want to hear, but they don't mean anything. Where's the action? Where's God in all of this?"

One person who has spouted many words on the homeless issue is supervisor Gary Patton, who said he "absolutely thinks the county should be doing everything we possibly can to provide emergency shelter."

Patton said the county has set aside \$35,000 for the shelter effort, but he added that more money — not opening county buildings to street people — is the solution.

"You can't just open a building and let people troop in and out and go about doing whatever they're doing," said Patton. "The key issue is money. There is no easy overnight solution."

Supervisor Joe Cucchiara agrees that the solution is not simple.

"I'm open to any and all alternatives that will bring people in from a cold and rainy night," said Cucchiara. "If that's possible, I would like to hear how from the human resources agency and the homeless task force."

Cucchiara added that he would like Imler to stop her fast, but he could not guarantee her that an emergency shelter to her liking will be here in the next few weeks.

"I don't think her putting her personal health in jeopardy is going to guarantee the clock moving any faster," said Cucchiara. "I hope she sees far sooner than (her starvation) that there already have been things that have occurred that would be sufficient cause for her to come off her fast."

Meanwhile Imler said she has fully considered the consequences of her action, and she has no intention of changing her mind.

"I came to grips with the concept of death a long time ago," she said. "I would like to believe my fast will make a difference, but I'm prepared for the reality if it doesn't."