



Homeless

part 4

AIMING FOR AN ANSWER

Let the record show: The homeless have always been with us. "Substantial numbers of people, throughout American

history, have chosen to live on the road. It's a familiar pattern of behavior." This is the retrospect of historian and UCSC Professor Page Smith.

For 25 years, the homeless have been a constant issue in Santa Cruz County, Smith recalled. "In the past, when

business was bad, merchants complained about undesirable transient elements. The situation hasn't changed that much. Up until recently nothing much was done about it."

Whether because of heart-felt concern or indignant outrage, numerous solutions to

the problems of homelessness are now on the table for examination.

Proposed solutions, coming from citizens' groups and social service agencies, fall roughly into three categories. Some solutions call for expanding the availability of shelter and housing for the homeless. Other remedies propose assisting homeless individuals in reshaping themselves to fit within prevailing accommodations.

The history of homelessness probably won't be stood on its head by any of these proposals. The homeless will not disappear. There are no panaceas. But there is hope aplenty that the course of this human saga will be altered to the satisfaction of both those who have housing and those who are without.

Two proposals for shelters center around the use of the acre of land behind the existing River Street Shelter.

The Citizen's Committee for the Homeless, a five-year-old organization led by Page Smith, Paul Pfotenbauer, and Fred Gray, is seeking to establish a permanent indoor shelter, housing up to 35 people, elderly homeless and homeless on SSI or small incomes. Community House is

the tentative name given to this project.

According to Smith, the Citizen's Committee envisions Community House as "a low-low cost housing facility." The committee has received a \$225,000 Red Cross grant, and applied for state funding to buy the property and to build the shelter.

The project is "encouragingly far along," said Smith. A press conference to describe the Community House project in greater detail will be held within the next several weeks, Smith said.

The Citizen's Committee for the Homeless has a solid track record, having been the impetus for the first homeless shelter in Santa Cruz on Cedar Street.

The committee was also sponsor to the interfaith Satellite Shelter program. Local churches, rotating the use of their church buildings, provide shelter for almost anyone who wants to be off the street. This program has been running for about five years, seasonally from October through May, except for a short period after last year's earthquake.

Noting that in the past year, an average of 90 to 100

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people sought and received shelter from the Satellite effort, Smith called it "the most important and cost-effective of all the shelter programs." Queries are being made proposing to extend the Satellite program to year-round operation.

Smith recognizes that shelter programs and other proposals are not going to take everyone off the street. "Living outdoors is an attractive way of life. A lot of people spend a great deal of money to go camping," he explained. "In every generation, quite a few people, particularly young men, don't want to be a part of the rat race."

There is also the mismatch between societal demands and individual capacity. "Society is not set up to make use of people who are sporadic and unreliable in the long haul," Smith said. "Above all the other various problems that some homeless people have, they don't have the capacity to sustain a 9-to-5 basis of respectability. And there are some people who want to be left alone."

The problem of homelessness is not going to go away, Smith concluded. "But a lot has been done. Because of shelters, life has been made easier for thousands of people."

Temporary Campground

Another more recent proposal for use of the River Street property is a temporary campground, a pilot program, that would provide legal and safe camping sites, facilities, and assistance services for up to 150 people.

This solution is also being put forward by a concerned citizens' group, the Coalition for a Safe Place to Sleep, comprised of over 25 community members. In the last six weeks, coalition members have met weekly with 40 to 50 homeless people in order to create and solidify a campground proposal.

Originating in the homeless community, the campground is seen by coalition members and the homeless as a viable response to the dilemma of a government enforced camping ban, in the absence of lawful and affordable places for people to sleep.

When Paul Brindel, a member of the Coalition, participated last March in a census of homeless people in Santa Cruz conducted by the Short Term Housing Coalition of Santa Cruz County, he was shocked. "We counted over 50 kids living in cars, and we know we missed a lot of others. We saw people who were ill living outside."

Brindel, who heads up the the Shelter Project, a component of the Community Action Board, described what he saw as a "serious health and safety situation. It is an emergency whenever people are living on the street," declared Brindel. "Being shocked about this is important. It's wrong; it hurts people."

For Brindel, a campground is an appropriate response not only to an emergency situation, but also to the legal dilemma.

"Because of shelters, life has been made easier for thousands of people."

—Page Smith

"If we don't want people sleeping in parks, streets, or in front of our houses, then what about people who can't afford to sleep anywhere?" he asked. "What about people who have personality disorders—not mentally ill—but don't get along well with people, co-workers, and bosses. So they can only work a few days a week, at best. The cost of living has aced these people out. You can't work three days a week and afford a place to live."

In mid-September, the coalition and members of the homeless community will present their proposal to the Santa Cruz City Council and apply for a temporary use permit for the campground.

Both the citizen's committee and the coalition agree that they are not in competition for the River Street property. In fact, the citizen's committee has endorsed the temporary campground proposal, as have more than 15 local organizations, including the Environmental Council, the Community Action Board, the ACLU, and Housing Now.

The proposal calls for the campground to be operated on a daily and 24-hour basis with a single entry and exit point. Campers would be charged \$1 per night. Work crews would be organized for those unable to pay. Fees collected would be used to defray operational costs of the camp.

People with children would be given priority in having camp space. A "quiet area" would be established for people with children and

others. Referrals would be made to shelters that specifically serve women and children.

Shower facilities are being planned, as well as secure lockers for storage of campers' belongings. Refuse disposal and chemical toilets would be provided along with potable water. Lighting and electricity are already available on the site.

A paid staff consisting of a full-time supervisor and three part-time site managers would be responsible for security, coordination of maintenance, bookkeeping services, supplies and liaison with governmental officials.

Out of their weekly meetings, the coalition and the homeless have developed rules for the governance of the camp. No drugs or alcohol, no campfires or camp stoves, no disruptive or physically abusive behavior, no violation of existing local state or federal laws, and no on-site parking.

Funding for the campground is being pursued from a variety of sources, including: religious organizations, private foundations and individuals in the community. A preliminary budget has been prepared that estimates the campground operational cost at under \$40,000 per year.

Permanent Campground

Nora Hochman, a member of the coalition and director of Santa Cruz County's Veterans' Services, personally supports the camping ban, but insists that people should have "an alternative to living in the streets or bushes. These people have a right to be somewhere. I don't think it should be the streets."

Because the River Street location is temporary, coalition members are also seeking a site for a permanent camp outside the city limits in an unincorporated area, Hochman said.

A permanent campground is needed, according to Hochman, because, "People have slept in so many different places, that when they wake up, they don't know where they are. They're disoriented."

From the draft proposal to be submitted to the Santa Cruz City Council, the purposes of the campground are:

- To meet the immediate need of homeless people for a safe and legal place to sleep with access to sanitary facilities.

- To provide homeless people with direct access to relevant services that address the complexity and variety of need, such as: employment and training services, health care delivery, Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous.

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- To mitigate the impact of homeless people travelling with all their belongings in the downtown commercial areas and enhance their chances of appropriate public behavior.

- To include homeless people in the process of solution-oriented projects that contribute to their safety, well-being, and positive participation in the community.

Coalition members suggest that a campground would also "mitigate some of the difficulties in the downtown business area."

When the Short Term Housing Coalition conducted its homeless census, over 2,000 shelterless people were counted.

Brindel acknowledged that a campground won't get everyone off the street. "A campground is what we can do locally; ultimately solutions must come from the national government."

Affordable Housing

Opportunities to increase the amount of affordable housing are moving forward on the national level, according to Brindel. He points to the Mickey Leland Housing Act currently before congress that proposes to allocate \$100 billion for public assisted housing.

This bill, also known as the Omnibus housing bill, grew out of the October 7 "Housing Now" march on Washington DC. More than 70 housing activists from Santa Cruz participated.

On the social service agency front, proposed solutions to the problems of homelessness are being fashioned "to make a dent in bite-sized pieces of the problem," said Will Lightbourne, chief administrator of Santa Cruz County's Human Resource Agency (HRA). Lightbourne is also hopeful that the Omnibus Housing Bill and other state-funded housing programs will ease the housing crunch.

"We have a housing market that is just insane, and it ripples all the way back down through the economy," said Lightbourne. "But if you focus on housing, you get paralysis."

Instead, social service providers are looking at taking sub-components of the problem and working up solutions, he said.

Employment Training

One program that the HRA is working on is a project that will assist runaway youths with employment training. A grant proposal for funding was written up and sent off last week by the HRA's Job Train-

ing and Placement program.

This program is a follow-up to the Homeless Employment project, which has assisted homeless individuals in securing better paying and steadier employment.

"If we had more funds, we could serve more people," said Jim De Alba who heads up the HRA's job programs. But funds are not the only problem, according to De Alba. "A number of people are homeless by choice and don't desire our assistance. They like free living, a free lifestyle. Living outside is a really attractive option, especially for young men and run-aways, not just in Santa Cruz, but also in San Luis Obispo, Santa Maria, Santa Barbara, and Marin."

De Alba described it as a widespread problem, "They're young, they think they can get a job while living on the street. Then things don't work out, problems progress, and pretty soon they are a drain on society."

Social Service programs can help, De Alba said, but only "if they have a desire to pull themselves up. They have to have a willingness to come off the streets and work with us," he explained. "It's frustrations that makes them not want to participate," he said. "People need to feel comfortable dealing with bureaucratic systems."

In addition to training and placement, the job programs provide things for the homeless that are taken for granted by most people, De Alba explained. "We give them an address, a place to receive messages, we help send away for birth certificates and IDs. We provide hygiene advice and counseling. We want to reduce the run-around factor."

Finding Solutions

Despite the efforts of social service agencies, society is "manufacturing homeless daily," said Lightbourne. "Absent major changes in national policy, there won't be major changes in the local situation. The system is stacked against mega-solutions."

Despite the magnitude of the homeless problem, locally and nationally, and despite the recognition that the homeless will always be with us, a caring local citizenry and thoughtful bureaucracy are unwilling to call it quits on the problem.

"We have to keep pushing that there are solutions," insisted Paul Brindel. "People think it's impossible—it's depressing. But that's not the way it is at all. These problems can be solved." □