

More needle boxes planned for S.C.

Syringe-disposal system expanded to include Metro transit system, four sites downtown

By **DAN WHITE**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — City maintenance workers and advocates for addicts rejoiced when the city put vandal-resistant needle-disposal boxes in 13 public restrooms last spring.

Some people were puzzled when they saw the padlocked containers with "biohazard" warning labels bolted to bathroom walls. But residents and tourists may be seeing more dirty-needle boxes soon — in downtown rest rooms as well as in transit centers countywide.

In the spring, workers installed 13 needle boxes in city-maintained bathrooms in the beach area, the Loudon Nelson Center and the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium. Now the city's Public Works department plans to ask the City Council for permission to put four more boxes in bathrooms downtown — at the Soquel Avenue and Locust Street garages.

In addition, the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District has already decided to put disposal boxes in six transit-center bathrooms in Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Watsonville this winter.

After no discussion, the City Council unanimously approved the

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original 13 boxes in May, after being lobbied by Parks and Recreation workers and administrators, who said maintenance workers had been pricked and potentially infected by dirty needles.

The city also listened to the testimony of staffers at the nonprofit Santa Cruz Needle Exchange Program, which offers addicts sterile injection needles for free through a one-for-one exchange and runs the Drop-In Center on Front Street. The group agreed to empty the biohazard containers regularly. The original 13 boxes cost the city about \$1,000. Installing four more in the

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parking garages would cost \$400.

Advocates say the boxes are safe places to dispose of needles used by everyone from heroin addicts to diabetics. They say addicts will seek out a fix whether locked boxes or dirty-needle drop-off centers exist, and that these boxes reduce risks to the general public, while helping to halt the spread of HIV and hepatitis among drug users.

Opponents, including spokespersons for the county's tourism and hospitality industries, say the boxes present the city in a squalid light while encouraging the drug users to share space with tourists who use public bathrooms.

City staff say the boxes are all holding up well and that no one has broken into them, releasing their potentially hazardous contents.

"It's solid," Kathy Agnone, administrative assistant of the Loudon Nelson center, said as she thumped a needle box. "It's double-locked."

The boxes have narrow feed tubes to stop people from reaching inside and getting hold of the needles. The containers include a sign saying they are for syringe disposal, and stickers with a picture of a needle.

This push for expansion is happening at a time when padlocked "Sharps" biohazard waste boxes are becoming more common. Rhode Island has a state-sponsored Sharps program. The San Francisco, Minneapolis-St. Paul and San Jose airports have them, too.

But the program in Santa Cruz — involving a team effort between city government and a health advocacy group that works with addicts — is unusual.

David Konno, facility manager of the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District, said bathroom maintenance-crew safety was the primary reason workers want to put Sharps containers in transit centers. He said the "prison quality" design of the boxes ensures worker safety, and that the transit board of directors had approved the plan.

Heather Edney of the needle exchange was not at her office Friday and did not have access to documents showing how many needles have been collected in the local boxes so far. But she said the number has not made a noticeable dent in the roughly 20,000 needles exchanged at the nonprofit's drop-in center every month.

She also said many needles deposited in the boxes so far "look pretty clean," leaving her to believe a number of users are diabetics who only used the needles once.

Edney acknowledged some backlash.

Needle exchange hopes to analyze used needles for DNA info

SENTINEL STAFF REPORT

SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz Needle Exchange, a nonprofit agency that provides clean needles for injection drug users through a one-for-one exchange, wants to find out exactly who has been using the 13 vandal-proof "Sharps" containers in city bathrooms.

Soon the agency hopes to use cutting-edge technology to do that. The agency has applied for research funding for human DNA testing on syringes recovered from the boxes in the beach area, and at the Loudon Nelson Center and Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

"We wanted to mark the location and find out what drugs they are using: insulin, heroin, cocaine," said Heather Edney of needle exchange. "Do they have HIV? Are they male or female? All can be done through DNA testing."

The nonprofit, responsible for emptying the various Sharps containers, has saved all the needles so far, in an undisclosed location.

"It's in a very safe place, and in biohazardous-waste containers," Edney said.

She said the testing will be left to the researchers, and that the materials won't be handled by the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange.

"This is a public health issue," she said. "It is not about morality. We don't condone people shooting up in bathrooms, but we definitely want to promote good public health."

Police Chief Steve Belcher supports the boxes.

"We enforce narcotics laws," he said, "And Sharps containers are a safety issue for the public that uses the facilities and employees that clean them."

"I know it's controversial," he said. "We received what we thought was good feedback and some negative comments. This is more of a worker issue. That was the main focus."

"I guess the question would be, 'What would happen to the needles without the (boxes)?'" Belcher said. "I don't think it encourages drug use. I think these people are going to use narcotics, period. The question is, would legitimate medical users of insulin have a place to dispose of their needles? The answer is yes."

Ranee Ruble, publicity director for the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council, is among those who say the placement of the boxes in highly visible tourist areas has a strong "negative impact on visitors who see them."

"I had my sister-in-law and two young nieces visiting me this past summer," she said. "We were out on the wharf watching the seals. My sister-in-law took the girls to the restroom and when she came back she was mortified. She said, 'Renee, what are those things, and why are they in a tourist bathroom?' I had difficulty responding."

This spring, John Robinson, a spokesman for the Seaside Co., which owns the Boardwalk amusement park, criticized the initial Sharps program as sending a "horrible message about

Santa Cruz" and "making the city comfortable for drug addicts."

There is, however, a range of opinions within the hospitality industry. Judith Hutchinson, co-owner of the Adobe bed and breakfast in Santa Cruz, said Sharps containers are "an absolute necessity. We need to make sure children and adults are safe and needles disposed of properly."

Some opponents say the boxes become an attractive nuisance, and create the horrifying possibility of addicts hanging out in areas frequented by tourists. The perception heightened this spring when a heroin user identified by police as a needle-exchange client was found dead of an overdose in a portable bathroom downtown.

Karla Leggett, a former heroin user who is program director of the Camp Recovery Centers, which treats drug and alcohol dependency, said the notion that Sharps containers create junkie hangouts and drive away tourists is ridiculous.

"I don't think John Q. Normal, walking through Santa Cruz with his family, will say, 'Oh my God, look at the Sharps container,' unless he is a diabetic or a doctor," she said.

"Any good junkie knows what a Sharps container is and it spreads by word of mouth," Leggett said. "(But) junkies aren't going to hang out by Sharps containers. They want to hang out where they can get dope and use it quickly and get more. Where are the junkies? Unfortunately, down in the (Beach) Flats. And where are the Flats? Unfortunately, near a major tourist attraction."

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