



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Sherry Conable erects a tent at City Hall Tuesday night to protest the camping ban.

City Hall sleep-out

Camping ban protest enters a new stage

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Members of the Coalition for a Safe Place to Sleep pitched sleeping bags on the City Hall lawn Tuesday night, beginning what they say will be a week-long series of "sleep-outs" to protest the City Council's treatment of the homeless.

Sherry Conable, spokeswoman for the coalition, said the organization was forced into civil disobedience when the Santa Cruz City Council — at its Sept. 25 meeting — voted down the coalition's request for a temporary campground for the homeless behind the River Street Shelter.

"The campground was never really judged on its merits," she said. "It was stonewalled, made to look untenable, and then cast off."

Conable said she expected at least two or three members of the coalition to camp illegally outside City Hall each night. The sleep-out will culminate next Tuesday night, the last meeting of the present City

Council before the Nov. 8 election.

On the first night of the protest, about 30 people showed up to register their support, Conable said. By late Tuesday, their numbers had dwindled to no more than six.

"Maybe over the the course of the week we'll get the word out well enough so that by next Tuesday we could see a really large gathering," Conable said.

The city's camping ban — enacted in the early '60s — makes it illegal to sleep outside in public between the hours of 11 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. The Santa Cruz Police Department has issued thousands of tickets for illegal camping since 1984. The crime is an infraction, and is increased to a misdemeanor if two tickets are written to a camper within a 48-hour time period.

Overall, city citations for illegal camping have shown a decline since homeless-rights activists ended their 24-hours-a-day vigil in front of the Santa Cruz Post Office.

"Tickets are way down since people stopped trying to get arrested," Deputy Police Chief Michael Dunbaugh said.

Pete Gonzalez, 42, owner of Rational Movers, was among the sleepers Tuesday night.

The 20-year resident of Santa Cruz and father of four, said he was moved to action out of disappointment over the council's refusal to deal with the homeless issue.

He said he and the other sleepers were prepared to suffer the consequences of their actions.

"We're prepared (to be arrested). We're prepared to join the long line of citizens who fall asleep at night and then get put through the arrest, detention and court system.

"Basically, what we're doing is objecting to the status quo, supporting Sandra Loranger's fast and also trying to make the public and the council aware that a proposal has come before them and gone by them. We still have people out there waking up with indentations of gravel in their faces," Gonzalez said.

Meanwhile, Loranger entered day 22 of her fast to bring attention to the homeless issue.

"I'm drinking just about every kind of juice known to man, and woman," she said. Loranger estimated she has lost about 10 pounds since beginning the fast, but is in otherwise good health.

"We really insist that something be done to make homeless people's lives more bearable, and more legal," Loranger said. "We just can't let this issue die and this (sleep-out) is just one way of keeping it alive. Some of us feel frustration and anger over that (the council vote) and perhaps this civil disobedience will help us to resolve those feelings."

As of 11:30 p.m., a half-hour after the camping ordinance takes effect, Santa Cruz police had made no arrests and issued no citations.

Staff writer Steve Perez also contributed to this story.

DECCO

Tuesday's cards

Hearts: King

Clubs: Queen

Diamonds: 10

Spades: 6