



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Veterans Council President Louis Ybarra wants volunteer Danny Christenson to stay

✓ County tosses veterans group from tiny downtown office

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SANTA CRUZ — A simmering feud between the county Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services Department and the United Veterans Council escalated to open warfare Thursday as parks officials evicted the veterans group from a small office on the first floor of the county-owned Veterans Memorial Building on Front Street.

The Parks Department wants to renovate the office — formerly a coat-check room — and install one of its own employees there on a part-time basis. Parks officials ordered the Veterans Council to remove its desk and files from the office by noon Thursday. When the group failed to comply, county workers removed the files and desk themselves, deposited them in a hallway and changed the locks on the office door.

A parks official, and Board of Supervisors Chairman Gary Patton, defended the action Thursday.

Meanwhile, spokesmen for the Veterans Council, a coalition of 16 veterans organizations, indicated their group would go to court to block the county move.

At the center of the controversy is Danny Christenson, a 33-year-old Navy veteran who works as a full-time volunteer for the Veterans Council and makes his home in the memorial building, where he sleeps on the floor.

Christenson said Thursday that he has lived and worked at the memorial building for 3½ of the last 4½ years. He said he took a year off to work for a Pacific Garden Mall shop, during which time he lived at the St. George Hotel. Currently, he said,

he's on an extended "leave" from his job on the Mall.

Christenson said he helps various veterans groups reserve rooms at the memorial building, which is available for both veterans events and other public functions. He said he makes sure there are no scheduling conflicts between veterans organizations and other groups using the facility.

A thin-faced man whose looks and dress are reminiscent of "Honeymooners" character Ed Norton, Christenson said he also looks after the building's security.

He said he receives no compensation from either the county or the Veterans Council for his work.

Veterans Council President Louis Ybarra said Thursday that Christenson's presence and the office he uses are indispensable to the smooth running of the memorial building.

"We have to have this office; we have to have somebody here who can schedule our veterans," Ybarra said. "Now we're being told we can't have the office any more.

"The issue is over one desk."

According to Janette Howell, a senior analyst with the Parks Department, the issue is over who runs the memorial building — the veterans or the county — and Christenson.

"When we have a problem, we deal with him (Christenson), except it's not been very effective," Howell said.

"We don't want him sleeping there. It can't be done (in the memorial building) any more than someone can sleep on the third floor of the county building.

"You can't have a public group come in to use a building and find

someone living in it; it just doesn't work."

Howell said she had proposed that the Veterans Council move its desk down the hall to the neighboring office of the Disabled American Veterans.

But a DAV spokesman said Thursday that his group couldn't share its office with the council. The Rev. Ed Muegge Jr., a retired minister, said he does counseling in the DAV office and said he couldn't share the space due to the confidential nature of his work.

Howell said there are plenty of other rooms in the building which the DAV could use for private counseling, if need be.

Muegge said the Parks Department, not the Veterans Council, should clear out of the memorial building.

"We're sick of being harassed," he said.

He and Ybarra said the Veterans Council had retained Santa Cruz attorney Ray Scott to seek a court injunction to block the county from ousting the council from its office.

"We want the court to give us an opinion so that we know what (rights) we have in the building," Muegge said.

Supervisors Chairman Patton said Thursday that he had advised the Veterans Council that it's the county's right to operate the facility.

"I told them that I believe the law gives the county the right to set the rules for the veterans building," Patton said.

"It's the county's policy to give priority to veteran uses and treat vets with all reasonable deference.

"But the county is running the building."