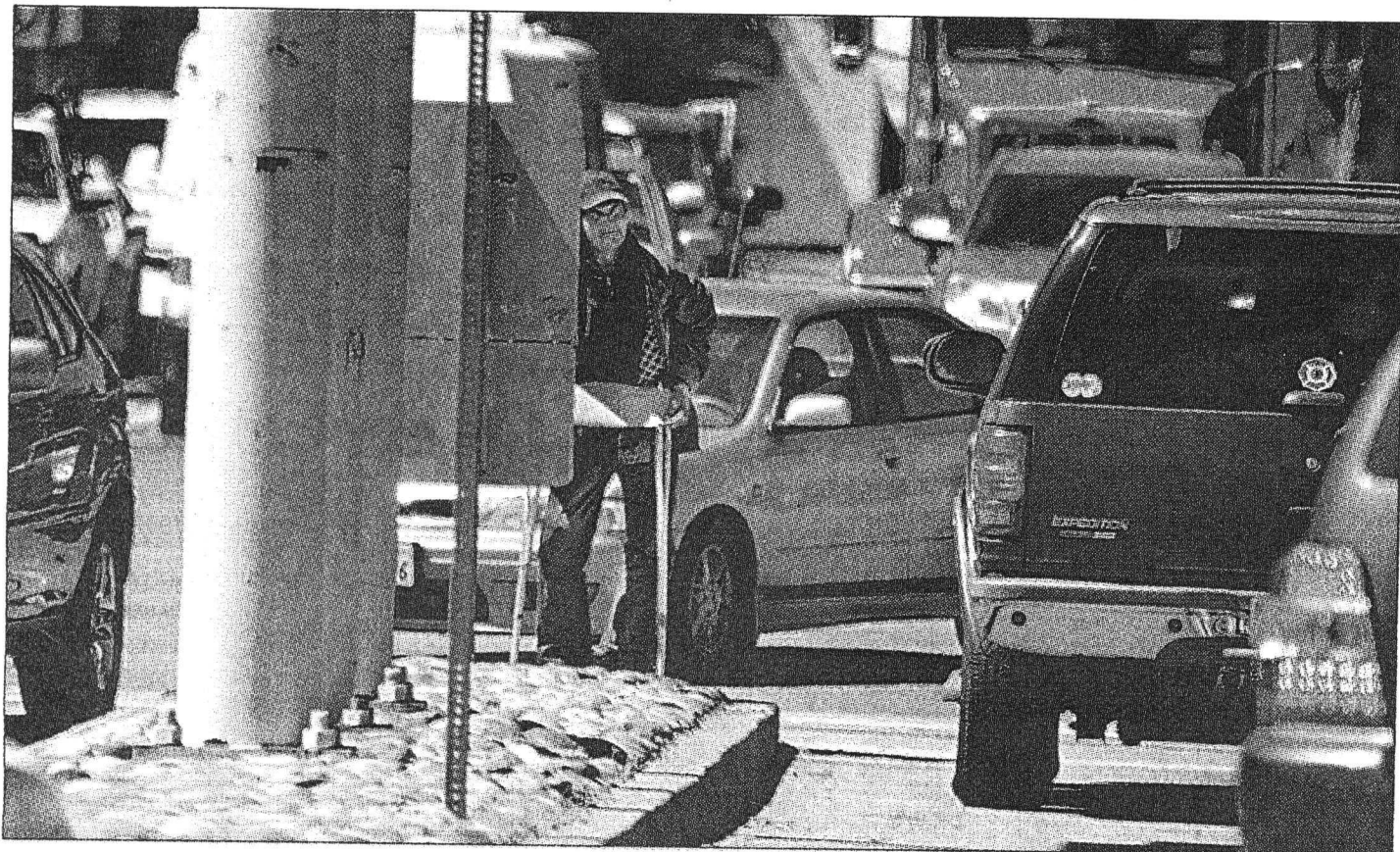


Council OKs new behavior rules for parks, medians

Measures target panhandling, illegal activities



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

A man panhandles on the River Street median at the Highway 1 interchange Tuesday afternoon, about the same time that the Santa Cruz City Council approved a measure that bans people from median strips, roundabouts or other traffic fixtures.

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz City Council approved two new public safety measures Tuesday targeting panhandling, alcohol use and other behaviors on beaches, parks and traffic medians — an action opponents described as an assault on free speech, the homeless and people suffering from mental illness.

The measures are part of ongoing efforts to address long-standing problems — aggressive solicitation, loitering downtown, overnight camping, discarded syringes — that have colored Santa Cruz's reputation as a sanctuary for homelessness and illegal drug use.

On a 5-2 vote, the council supported a rule banning people from median strips, round-

abouts or other traffic fixtures to reduce panhandling, prostitution or other activities not related to crossing the street. The council's public safety committee recommended the measure.

City officials said the public is at great risk of being struck by vehicles, and that motorists could collide with another vehicle stopped to give money or communicate with someone on a median, which are 18 inches to 3 feet long.

"It presents a dangerous situation to themselves and serves as a distraction to drivers, who move through or accelerate through intersections at a speed of 30 or 40 mph," said Scott Collins, assistant to the city manager.

State law already bans panhandling on freeway onramps and offramps, but doesn't

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BRENT ADAMS, activist

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cover people who remain on medians. Berkeley has a measure similar to Santa Cruz's new law, signs for which would be posted at six key intersections including Highway 1 and 9, Ocean and Water streets and Capitola Road and Soquel Avenue.

"What this is addressing is people holding signs and asking for handouts," homelessness activist Brent Adams said. "This is a veiled attempt to attack homeless people without even uttering the word homeless."

Councilmen Don Lane and Micah Posner agreed and raised concerns about the new ordinance banning political protests on medians.

"There are lots of other places where pedestrians are close to vehicles around the community and in the end we can't really prevent that," Lane said, talking about sidewalks and crosswalks. "I think the fundamental motivation behind this is they don't want to see people panhandling."

Also Tuesday, the council unanimously supported a new rule allowing park officials to ban for 24 hours people who receive a citation or are arrested for breaking

the law at a beach or open space. Those who refuse the order — civil citations are often torn up or go unpaid — would be charged with a misdemeanor.

But Posner dissented on a related rule making it a misdemeanor to interfere with a park maintenance worker or threaten or bother anyone on the beach or in a park through conduct or foul language.

Several speakers said the rule gives anyone the power to get someone charged with a misdemeanor if they simply dislike what they're doing or saying.

"That is the authoritarian state," Posner said. "To me,

that is really scary."

Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews said the new ordinance was a "common sense" approach to creating a safer working environment for parks employees who "have had to put up with untenable behavior" and safeguard parks for "a broad cross-section of the public."

"This is exactly why we have parks and want parks and allow families to enjoy them," she said. "This is not about homelessness. It's about behavior, pure and simple."

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