

Unusual approach taken on homeless

Homeless-2000

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Santa Cruz has approved a program that lets groups of up to 15 people camp in three city parks for two weeks in exchange for community service.

By Ken McLaughlin

Mercury News

✓ After a bitter and divisive discussion, one of the nation's most liberal cities has approved a program to deal with homelessness in a novel way.

The Santa Cruz City Council voted 7-0 Tuesday night to allow homeless people to camp overnight in three city parks in exchange for clearing streams, trash cleanup and other community service work.

The law, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, has been depicted by the national media as just another half-baked idea in a town run by starry-eyed leftists. But council members portrayed the new law as a worthy experiment, and some homeless activists hailed it as a possible model for a country whose sour economy has suddenly put tens of thousands of additional homeless people on city streets.

"Our aim is to exceed expectations," said activist Tom Shaver. "We envision a time when neighborhoods joyfully invite us to set up and do work in their area."

The law is geared toward groups, not homeless individuals, in that it requires such things as liability insurance, portable toilets and security deposits. In addition, the groups — limited to 15 — can't stay in one place for more than two weeks. The council will re-evaluate the program in six months.

"We have not heard of anything like this — and we track these kinds of ordinances," said Maria Foscarinis, executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, based in Washington, D.C.

Indeed, other cities looking for new ideas —

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ones that go beyond sweeping homeless people off the streets or driving them to the outskirts of town — will no doubt be closely watching the law to see if it works.

The first group to take advantage of the law, which takes effect in 28 days, will be former residents of Camp Paradise, the illegal campground that was washed away by floods in early December. The camp, set up along the banks of the San Lorenzo River, made headlines by banning drugs and alcohol and hauling away tons of trash in an area once known as Heroin Alley.

"This law will give us a chance to prove ourselves," said Larry Templeton, 41, who ran the camp. "We're not going to put up with a bunch of drunks or heroin addicts — and we'll call the police if they show up."

Templeton and his group — which has dwindled to about a dozen people from about 50 — are now living in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. The group has formed the Santa Cruz Service Corps and works out of an old home at Coral and River streets. The corps has been clearing brush, cleaning up graffiti and trash as well as repairing the homes of low-income and elderly people.

After the council gave the ordinance its first airing last month, City Hall was besieged with complaints. Residents complained that the homeless would turn the three parks — Harvey West, San Lorenzo and lower DeLaveaga adjacent to Branciforte Drive — into cesspools.

"It would make more sense to open the Civic Auditorium to camping — at least it has indoor plumbing," wrote Larry Pearson, who described himself as a lifelong liberal Democrat. "Your hearts are in the right place, but this is an issue you need to decide with your heads."

Even homeless activists are divided.

"What's a bit shocking is that in order for people to be allowed to sleep — an essential activity of life — they must do community service," Foscarnis said.

Her group and the National Coalition for the Homeless had recently singled out Santa Cruz as one of the "meanest" little cities in America in cracking down on beggars, street dwellers, public drunks and loiterers.

Ken Cole, executive director of Santa Cruz's Homeless Services Center, said he could see the idea finding appeal because it "harkens back to the days of the WPA and Great Depression and that kind of approach. ... It is unusual — working for the privilege of camping."

But the "biggest red flag" he sees is the possible tension that may result when a group of unsanctioned campers tries to use the portable toilets and other facilities of the sanc-

tioned group.

"It's worth a try, but we certainly don't need any more failures," said Cole, alluding to the

with out-of-state RVs, drug users and people who left trash and human waste.

Last month, two council members, Tim Fitzmaurice and Keith Sugar, had expressed serious reservations about the new law.

"I see it failing miserably," Sugar said. "There's lots of details that have to be

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city's disastrous experiment two years ago with allowing people to camp overnight in their vehicles in two industrial areas. The "safe-sleeping zones" were quickly overrun

ironed out."

But apparently the council decided that the angel was in the details.

Ironically, the only council member to come out forcibly

against the law Tuesday was Mark Primack, a candidate for Santa Cruz County supervisor. Along with council members Scott Kennedy and Ed Porter, Primack had been one of the prime backers of the law.

But he worried aloud Tuesday that the law had become so restrictive that it wouldn't do much good. In addition, he said he didn't think it was a good idea to have children on baseball diamonds mingling with homeless people.

Primack's reversal triggered a tirade from Fitzmaurice, who chastised his colleague for "raising people's expectations" and then shooting them down.

"I'm as skeptical about this

law as anyone can be ... but the council has to hang together or we hang separately," Fitzmaurice said.

Fitzmaurice was apparently persuaded. Primack eventually reversed himself again, even though he said he had concerns that the city might be creating a pool of "slave labor."

He conceded that his move was "flip-flop-flip," but pointed out, "Councils flip all the time," particularly on homeless issues.

Concluded Porter: "It's just one more brick in a mosaic in things we do that make sense."

Contact Ken McLaughlin at kmclaughlin@sjmercury.com or (831) 423-3115.

HOMELESS PLAN

Santa Cruz's new law permits groups of homeless people to camp in three city parks in exchange for doing stream restoration, trash cleanup and other public service work. The parks are Harvey West Park, the San Lorenzo Park bench lands and lower DeLaveaga Park adjacent to Branciforte Drive. Here are other details of the law:

Groups will be limited to 15 overnight campers, who can stay in one spot no longer than two weeks.

Their stay must be approved by the city parks and recreation director.

The groups must have parking and traffic control, toilets and other sanitary facilities, security, liability insurance, trash collection and cleanup, as well as security and cleanup deposits.

Six months after the law takes effect, the city council will review it to see whether the restrictions should be "maintained, modified or lifted."

Source: City of Santa Cruz