

Council votes public funds in sexual harassment fight

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SANTA CRUZ — City Council members say it is time to educate the public about the nature of sexual harassment of women.

The council agreed that such things as obscene remarks or gestures, pinching, or lewd staring at women by men is a serious matter to be dealt with publicly at the expense of taxpayers.

At this point, no dollar estimate has been made.

The council voted unanimously Tuesday to fund public workshops on how to stop verbal sexual harassment, to distribute

brochures and encourage classes on the topic in the schools, and to urge employers to give women employees time off to attend the workshops.

"We have a problem that is obviously educational," commented Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt. She believes men can learn that harassment of women is "offensive and infuriating to women."

But council members did not agree it is time to post "NO HARASSMENT OF WOMEN" signs in the city.

The signs, brochures, classes and workshops had been recommended by the city's Commission on the Violence Against Women, a group of council appointees

assigned the task of figuring out how much sexual harassment occurs, and what can, or should, be done about it.

The commission had recommended the signs be posted on the Pacific Garden Mall, in buses and in stores, alongside other signs warning against such things as littering or dogs without leashes.

Councilwoman Jane Weed said the signs would be "demeaning the issue to the level of littering or dogs." The issue, she said, is a "much more important, deeper educational issue."

However, Councilman Michael Rotkin said signs would not be belittling the issue.

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but opening it up to public debate.

Signs would be "a public statement to the fact that this is an issue the city takes seriously," commented Rotkin.

However, Wormhoudt said the "NO HARASSMENT OF WOMEN" signs would imply it would be acceptable to harass children or men. Posting of signs or distributing brochures with "more sophisticated" information, particularly in city buses, would be better, she said.

Council members unanimously agreed to direct the commission to reconsider the sign idea and to consider "more creative" signs with a greater educational value.

The council made no decision on how much money should be spent for the educational program.

The commission's recommendations were based on the results of a survey of women about incidents of harassment on the Pacific Garden Mall.

The surveys, filled out by women employees, visitors and shoppers on the Mall, showed that the men and boys doing the harassing were of all ages, and of all manners of dress.

The women completing the surveys described their harassers as construction workers, musicians, tourists, "nice men," "friendly," "dirt bags," neatly dressed, tattooed, bearded, clean shaven, "student types with backpacks," "surfer types," "blue-collar types," "people who looked familiar," wearing suits, T-shirts, jeans or carrying blankets.

One woman said her harasser was in a wheelchair.

"I have to admit that I have had my prejudices," commented Wormhoudt. "I have to admit I thought there was one kind of man guilty of harassing women on the Mall."

But after reading the results of the survey, Wormhoudt said she realizes there is no stereotype for the harasser.

"If there is a specific type who harasses, I'm sure it is male, and if there is a place (where sexual harassment occurs), I'm sure it is everywhere," said Wormhoudt.

Earlier this year, the council had ordered the commission to address the complaints about harassment on the Mall.

Survey results showed harassment occurs everywhere in the city, not just on the Mall.

There was a low return rate of completed surveys. More than 1,131 were distributed last spring to women employees, store owners, shoppers and visitors to the Mall. Of that amount, 129 were returned. Eighty-eight incidents of harassment were detailed on the returned surveys.