

# Homeless Garden Project celebrates 10 years

Homeless  
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It's a Santa Cruz story if there ever was one: A small group started by some neighbors to pay homeless people to grow organic food, in an alliance with business developers like Barry Swenson Builders, turned 10 this year.

The Homeless Garden Project is celebrating with a benefit by the Knights of Columbus Saturday night and the opening of a seasonal flower store downtown — the former site of Roberts Leather on Pacific Avenue, donated by Swenson. The project is also struggling with a housing crisis of its own.

In fact, the group has been looking for a permanent home for 10 years. The organization, started in

A worker identified only as Jim worked at the Shaffer Road Homeless Garden in April 1999.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



May 1990 by Paul Lee and his West-side neighbors, hopes to move from borrowed land near Natural Bridges State Beach to nine acres in the Pogonip greenbelt by the beginning of next year. The City Council will eventually have to approve a management plan for the garden, but before then, the group will need to raise the money to make the move. The Knights of Columbus will host a benefit dinner dance for the Homeless Garden Project Saturday.

"The garden is what Santa Cruz is about, especially with the organic food," said Katherine Beiers, a member of the board who helped get the garden legal status in 1990. "People work in the soil, work with the earth, work out their issues and problems and improve their lives. It's the person who's most disenfranchised (who is) helped by this."

If they do, in fact, move to Pogonip, it will be the third move for the group in a decade. First, they were located for years on city land on Pelton Avenue. Then, when the city decided to sell the land in 1998, the

group moved its vegetable garden to land owned by Barry Swenson Developers on Shaffer Drive and moved its Women's Organic Flower Enterprise to the city-owned Depot site. Now, the group is hoping it will move one last time, to the greenbelt.

The organization employs about 20 homeless people a year, about 400 people since its inception. That's far less than the estimated 1,273 homeless people living in the area, according to the Santa Cruz County Homeless 2000 Census and Needs Assessment. But it gives homeless people a chance to earn money and get back on their feet, said Homeless Garden Project Executive Director Jane Petroff. The homeless men and women who participate are employed and given job training in horticulture, ecological sustainability, and organic farming, she said. The produce and flowers are then sold to the community in shares.

Petroff said she's not sure how much it will cost to move to Pogonip. In the last year, the city allo-

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cated more than \$10,000 to the organization for operations and about \$25,000 for management and the operational report the organization must give to the city before they'll be allowed to move. In 1999, the Homeless Garden Project raised about \$111,000 in donations, as well. The city has set aside nine acres for the project — far more than the three and a half acres they now use. Petroff said they're excited about the prospect of being united on a far larger piece of land.

"It's all tentative right now, though," she said. "It depends on what the council does. And it will probably take a few years to move up there entirely."

*The Harvest Dinner Dance will be held from 6:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday at St. Joseph's Hall, 635 Monterey Ave., Capitola. It will include a dinner, dancing and a silent auction.*

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