

If homeless exercised they'd be swept away



OUR TOWN

BY TED WINTERER

(Editor's note: Ted Winterer is on vacation. This is a reprint of a past column.)

Some feel City Hall has been too soft on our homeless population, as if we ought to recruit John Ashcroft to round up all the street people and ship them off to Guantanamo Bay. Others decry any attempts to crack down on street living and antisocial behavior as "a Rudy Giuliani-esque solution that calls for sweeping the problem under the rug without actually solving it" — to quote a guest columnist from these pages.

Often forgotten when people recall the success Mayor Giuliani had in reducing New York's homelessness, using the "broken windows" school of policing which doesn't tolerate petty crimes, is the other part of the equation: New York built housing for those without homes. I have previously suggested that Santa Monica adaptively reuse the old RAND buildings to temporarily house those without homes and provide substance abuse treatment, job training and the like. If City Hall doesn't consider this option it will have to suffer charges of NIMFYism (Not In My Front Yard) and no longer scold residents leery of affordable housing or shelters in their neighborhoods.

New York and Philadelphia have pursued successful homeless policies which combine providing housing and making the streets less hospitable. Call it the carrot and the stick approach or charity and tough love: It works because it acknowledges that while many homeless need and want public assistance, some are scoundrels mired in a subculture of vagrancy.

It's not compassionate to run off the less fortunate when they have no place to live. At the same time, it's unfair to the housed to see their parks taken over as campgrounds, streets fouled with human waste, and children intimidated by menacing behavior.

Suppose you had a loved one living in one of our parks. You'd do your best to intervene rather than enable behavior which perpetuates degrading destitution. Yet here in Santa Monica that's just what we do. If I were to overindulge in holiday nog and urinate in the street in front of the police I'd be hauled off to the pokey. But I think we all know that's not what happens to the homeless. And if a citizen witnesses public intoxication or disorderly

conduct by a street person and calls the SMPD, often the response is underwhelming.

Pressed about this tolerance for antisocial behavior, our civic leaders caterwaul about the civil rights of the homeless while the SMPD laments its limited resources and the requisite triage by which higher profile crimes take precedence.

I suggest, however, that the real issue is simply a lack of institutional will, that City Hall can write and enforce ordinances which enhance everyone's quality of life. Consider Santa Monica Municipal Code, Article 4.20.010 governing the use of median planting strips. It states that "it shall be unlawful to use the median planting strips for anything but jogging or walking. All other activities are strictly prohibited." A few years ago signs citing this ordinance were posted at the median on Fourth Street between San Vicente Boulevard and Adelaide Drive, at the top of the stairs leading up from the floor of Santa Monica Canyon. Why? Some affluent homeowners nearby, dismayed by the presence of fitness enthusiasts who would climb those stairs and then stretch on the grassy median, used the clout of their wealth to prevail upon City Hall to enforce this law (ironically in the epicenter of the great hedge code debate of our last election).

Police officers began shooing away stair climbers, fitness classes and even mothers lounging with their babies and threatening those who disregarded the law with citations. I myself was chased off the median, for the unseemly offense of some sit-ups to tone my middle-aged gut, by not one but two of Santa Monica's Finest. The younger of this pair admitted he much preferred his work reducing gang violence in the Pico neighborhood but was assigned to the "Stair Climber Task Force" by his superiors. I suspect most folks in this town would rather have the police quell gang violence than suppress sit-ups.

It seems to me that if City Hall has the will and resources to prosecute dastardly crimes such as hamstring stretching on public property, it ought to be able to more aggressively enact and effect laws restricting inappropriate behavior in our parks and streets. Or will that only happen if the homeless camp out on the ritzy turf at Fourth and San Vicente?

(Ted Winterer is a writer who lives in Ocean Park. After consulting his consultants, he has resolved to spend less time listening to Pacifica Radio and more time trimming the hair which sprouts out of his ears. He can be reached at ourtownsmdp@aol.com.)