

There Is No OK Place To Be

NIMBYS – “Not in My Backyard Syndrome”

Friendship Park in Sacramento is at once an oasis of survival services for homeless people and a lightning rod for the city’s NYMBYS because it symbolizes the religious principle that people who are down and out deserve care and assistance, not moral judgment.

NYMBYS, aided and abetted by local government officials, take the position that homeless people do not exist in our community, and if they do exist, they should not be allowed to do so. There can be no excuse for being homeless, they say, unless the person has chosen such a life style, and the policy makers of our community do not support or condone this kind of life style choice. Be gone, they shout!

To accomplish their purpose of eliminating homeless people, they espouse the scorched earth policy; i.e., no allowable zoning will be permitted for siting emergency shelters or social services; for services already existing, new (punitive) special permits are required; the city’s housing agency will be prohibited from proposing any new construction of affordable (very low cost) housing; decades-old downtown SRO hotels and hundreds of low-cost units will be razed in order to promote new high-rise downtown office towers; an aggressive law enforcement campaign will enforce the city’s anti-camping ordinance; there will be no feeding programs in public parks or at churches without special-use permits; and a so-called misdemeanor jail will be built for homeless people who commit such quality-of-life crimes as begging, camping on the river, or loitering in the downtown area.

In other words, homeless people, should they happen to exist in our community, are not welcome here, and they must be removed. Where? Anywhere else, but not here!

After many years of listening to the drumbeat of unchallenged public testimony by NYMBYS trashing homeless people, using unspeakable invective to urge their removal and/or incarceration, I came to understand how much they despised and feared homeless people. The silence of city council members in the face of such hateful attacks visited upon the most

impoverished members of the community surely manifested tacit approval and provided encouragement for future ad hominem onslaughts. I hesitate to write this because it sounds so much like Nazism, but I believe it to be true: if the NYMBYS of the mid-1990's could have acted with impunity, they would have arranged for the vaporization of homeless people in our community. Harsh words, you may say, but believed to be true by homeless people.

The NIMBY collision with Loaves & Fishes was inevitable. I knew it was coming years before it happened, because I had had enough experience working with impoverished people to recognize the distant sound of the drumbeat of hatefulness, which foretold its arrival. Even so, I was not fully prepared, because it is not possible to predict what form such an attack will take and how the issue will be framed for public consumption.

It was a thriller! The city filed a lawsuit to close down Loaves & Fishes because of its proposed expansion of Friendship Park and the fact that it was feeding hungry people on Sundays. Both unlawful, they said. The next day, they sent swarms of building, fire, and planning inspectors to sweep through the Loaves & Fishes complex looking for code and zoning violations. City attorney employees arrived days later to “post” every building in the complex (including leased space) as “unsafe” and provided a 45-day statutory time period to file building plans for building permits to correct code violations. The director of the city building department posted a sign on the department’s staff bulletin board, which reminded city employees that building permits were not to be issued to Loaves & Fishes. They locked us down pretty tight.

You have heard the expression, “You can’t fight city hall.” But you can, and we did. It took us almost a year, but the lawsuit was settled out of court, through the services of a mediator, when the city agreed to give Loaves & Fishes everything it asked for and we agreed to drop our plans to expand Friendship Park. The most painful moment I had to endure was to appear with the council members during a hastily called press conference that announced the settlement. If you can believe this, we were all smiles and full of congratulations for one another. Other than that, as stressful as it was, I loved every minute of it.

Now, ten years later, the city tiptoes around Loaves & Fishes, the NIMBYS have dissipated, our redevelopment area developers have receded into the background, and Loaves & Fishes continues to expand.

Scratch that; I just heard the distant sound of the drumbeat.