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Homeless veteran out of luck even before RV ban

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A U.S. Army veteran with Mescalero tribal roots who is battling cancer, James Humphries is among the city's many RV-dwellers who are left wondering where to go after the Santa Barbara City Council banned oversized vehicles from parking on city streets last week.

"I served my country for my rights as well as yours," Mr. Humphries told the News-Press in front of Santa Barbara City Hall on Friday.

Having served in the Army's military police at Ford Ord in the late 1970s, Mr. Humphries often handled hazardous biological materials and at age 59 suffers with malignant tumors on his thyroid, liver and arm.

The ban criminalizes homelessness, he said.

"How do you fight City Hall when you live in your vehicle?" he asked.

But parking a recreational vehicle in Santa Barbara was already a challenge even before the RV ban, Mr. Humphries said.

His home a truck with a camper attached was towed away three weeks ago after he had neglected to pay a whopping stack of more than 30 parking tickets for parking on city blocks that prohibit RVs.

The city's vehicle code mandates that any vehicle that's been issued five or more parking violations to which the owner has not responded can be towed away.

But Mr. Humphries was not aware that his camper qualified as an RV since that wasn't how it was registered with the Department of Motor Vehicles, and believed the tickets that he received for parking in RV zones were not legal, he said.

According to City Attorney Ariel Calonne, the tickets were lawfully issued.

"I couldn't believe they actually did it," Mr. Humphries said, noting that everything he owned was stowed in his camper.

He's left with more than \$3,000 in city fines and tow yard charges that he's not able to afford on his fixed income.

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James Humphries, a 59-year-old U.S. Army veteran who is battling cancer, is among Santa Barbara's RV dwellers left without a place to go after a citywide ban on RV parking was passed last week.

KENNETH SONG/NEWS-PRESS

Since then, he and his gentle giant of a companion, Chunk, a Rottwieler mix, have been living in a friend's RV.

Even if he does get his vehicle back, Mr. Humphries will likely be pushed out of Santa Barbara since he will have nowhere to park.

Asked where he would go if he gets his truck back, he paused.

"Where would I go? I don't know. I really don't know."

The ban, passed unanimously, takes effect in about a month. The council also formed a committee that has already begun considering additional off-street parking for people living in vehicles.

The committee comprises Councilwoman Cathy Murillo, Councilman Frank Hotchkiss and Kristine Schwarz, the executive director of New Beginnings Counseling Center, which runs a safe parking program for people who live in their vehicles.

Ms. Murillo said it was difficult to vote yes to the ban, as she knew the regulations would make life difficult for people who already have very difficult lives.

She aims to find additional parking for RV-dwellers who need to run errands in town whether its going to a doctors appointment or dropping the kids off at school, she said.

Ms. Schwarz said that in an ideal world, the council would have postponed the ban until a solution for folks living in their RVs was already reached.

"But every council member seemed open to coming up with a solution," she said. "That encouraged me."

The councils ban took aim at oversized vehicles in order to abate traffic safety issues related to any vehicle longer than 25 feet, wider than 80 inches or higher than 82 inches blocking views of traffic.

But Mr. Humphries said it punishes homeless people.

"If you're homeless, you're a deviant a thief, a convict. You're up to no good," he said.

He's conflicted between not wanting to be a burden, and living in constant fear that he's going to get that knock on the RV door asking him to leave, or that he's going to be towed again.

"Just let me live," he said.

Longtime homeless activist Peter Marin, co-founder of the Committee for Social Justice, has been working to help Mr. Humphries and even addressed the council about his situation last week.

"I know you all think people shouldn't live in RVs, but this guy is a vet. He's suffered enough, Mr. Marin told the council. He's on the street and he doesn't deserve to be on the street."

Contributions are being accepted by mail to the Committee for Social Justice at 750 Mission Oaks Lane and should be marked for James Humphries, until a GoFundMe account is set up online later this week.

email: eleslie@newspress.com

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James Humphries, homeless veteran

