

**Report from the Open Forum  
Regarding Issues of  
Homelessness in Ocean Beach**

**July 6, 2010**

**Prepared by**

**San Diego Restorative Justice Mediation Program  
in conjunction with the  
Ocean Beach Inter-Faith Community**

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

## INTRODUCTION

In mid-June, 2010, a merchant in the community of Ocean Beach, San Diego, California, began selling a sticker focused on homelessness in the community. Fashioned after the California State Parks signage discouraging feeding bears, the sticker read, “Welcome to Ocean Beach/Please Don’t Feed Our Bums.”<sup>1</sup> Seen as a response to aggressive panhandling and youthful, apparently able bodied, homeless called “Travelers,” the community responded. Some saw the message as appropriate, some humorous, and others as hate speech. The controversy over the sticker and the issues surrounding homelessness in the community, culminated in a protest in front of the merchant’s business calling for a boycott of the business. “Both” sides participated and close monitoring by the San Diego Police Department precluded the vocal protestations from turning violent.

On July 6, 2010, the inter-faith community of Ocean Beach<sup>2</sup> sponsored an open forum to discuss the issues surrounding the homelessness in Ocean Beach. The purpose of the forum was twofold. First, the inter-faith community recognized the escalating polarization and anger in the community regarding the issues involved with the homeless and the forum was viewed as a venue to de-escalate the growing animus in the community. Second, the forum was designed as a spring board to bring the community back together and begin working toward transforming the conflicts and collaborating on solutions.



<sup>1</sup> Countering the “Please Don’t Feed our Bums” sticker, the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless, designed its own sticker, seen above on the right, which was presented at the forum.

<sup>2</sup> The inter-faith community consisted of representatives of St. Peters by the Sea Lutheran Church, Point Loma United Methodist Church, All Souls Episcopal Church, Second Chance Ministries, Sacred Heart of Ocean Beach Catholic Church, Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Bethany Lutheran Church, First Baptist Church of Ocean Beach

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The forum was held at the Sacred Heart of Ocean Beach Parish Hall, a facility large enough to hold the expected 75 to 100 attendees. The process to be used was the peace circle format. The issues to be addressed and the rules of the forum were posted in advance on the OB Rag blog site (<http://obrag.org/?p=21710>). Additionally, those who attended were asked to sign in with a name and e-mail and were given a name tag (first name only), a set of the issues to be discussed and the rules of the forum. The facilitators were provided by the San Diego Restorative Justice Mediation Program (SDRJMP), and members of the faith community who had received training prior to the forum. Each facilitator was provided with a checklist to follow to ensure uniformity of the process (See Appendix A).

The forum was of public interest and there were five television news stations and two print media representatives. Concerns over grandstanding, or the chilling effect of the media lead to a compromise regarding media coverage of the event. The moderator met with media representatives before the forum began and allowed them to film and photograph prior to the beginning of the peace circles. The process and the reasoning behind the exclusion were explained. Not surprisingly, all the representatives of the media cooperated with the desires of the organizers, with little to no complaint.

The forum opened with a welcome from Fr. Ron Hebert, Pastor of the Sacred Heart of Ocean Beach Parish, followed by a brief overview and invocation by Rev. Thomas Ziegert of the United Methodist Church. The invocation prayer was by Thomas Merton, and can be found in the Appendix B. The moderator, from SDRJMP, then explained the peace circle process to the attendees. In explaining the process, the moderator informed the attendees the forum was not organized to find a solution, but to identify issues and begin the collaborative process in addressing issues surrounding homelessness in Ocean Beach.

Approximately 235 people showed up to the forum. Of those, about 190 attendees actually engaged in the process. The moderator had those who planned to participate, count off beginning with “one” continuing through to “ten.” The number counted by the participant indicated the circle the individual was to work in. This assured a cross section of the community in each circle (e.g. no one group was made up of strictly homeowners, business owners, or members of the houseless community).

Each circle had between fifteen and seventeen participants. There was one facilitator and one scribe assigned to each circle. The duty of the scribe was to record the responses for each circle to the issues addressed by the participants. After a reading of the rules by the circle facilitator, and given an opportunity to ask questions, each participant was asked to sign the agreement to follow the rules in the circle (see figure #1). The session involved two rounds (see figure #2).

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After the first round, the scribes wrote down the responses from their group onto large easel paper and taped them to the walls of the hall. By doing so the participants could view what they had been able to accomplish in the first round of discussions.

Peace Circle Rules

- 1) I agree the facilitators are in full control of the Peace Circle.
- 2) I agree to speak the truth.
- 3) I agree only one person may speak at a time, and I will not interrupt.
- 4) I agree to listen to those who are speaking, and if necessary, to summarize accurately what another has said.
- 5) I agree to speak respectfully to all during the Peace Circle.
- 6) I will not use threats, profane language or obscenities during the Peace Circle.
- 7) I have come to the circle to engage in solutions.

Signature of participants

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Figure 1*

Name two things you love about Ocean Beach?

Name two things which have drawn you to Ocean Beach whether you are a business owner or resident?

Name two things you find negative about Ocean Beach?

Describe the kind of community you desire Ocean Beach to be?

What is in the way of making Ocean Beach the kind of community you desire?

What resources do we have to make Ocean Beach the kind of community you desire?

What resources do we need to make Ocean Beach the kind of community you desire?

How do we address the threat to peace in our community this summer and beyond?

*Figure 2*

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By posting issues and rules in advance, providing the same at the door and then asking the participants to sign the agreements, the facilitators were given the authority to oversee the process, keep it positive and under control.

## FINDINGS FROM THE CIRCLES

The following is a compilation and distillation of the thoughts from each of the circles.

### Name two things you love about Ocean Beach?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Community (Including Sense of Community, Small Town Atmosphere, Accessibility, Safety)	46
Location (Including Beach, Ocean, Sunset Cliffs, Sunsets, Weather Pier)	43
Diversity/Tolerance/ Friendliness/Generosity	38
Attitude	
Sense of Freedom	5
Non materialistic/Mom & Pop shops	4
Grassroots movements	5
Stubbornness to change	2
Opportunity	2
Attitude toward homeless	2
General	
Activities (Surfing)	5
Restaurants/Coffee Houses	5
Dog Beach/Dog Friendly	5
History/Architecture	2
Church	2
Services	2
Affordability	2
Parrots	2

*Figure 3*

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

Name two things which have drawn you to Ocean Beach whether you are a business owner or resident?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Laidback, Small town Atmosphere	22
Family	12
People	10
Friends	7
Church	6
“Funkiness”	6
Native	6
Shared Community Vision/Community Solutions	4
School	1
<u>Library</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	75
Location (Beach, Ocean, Pier, Weather)	26
<u>Clean Environment</u>	<u>7</u>
Total	32
Affordability/Accessibility	17
Acceptance/Diversity	14
Job including Military	8
Range of Activities (Surfing)	8
Serendipity/Opportunity	4
Either being homeless or interacting with homeless	4
Locally Owned Business	3
Dog Friendly	3
Historic/Artistic	2
Hippies	2
A Place with Roots	1
Hodads	1
Would never leave	6

*Figure 4*

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

Name two things you find negative about Ocean Beach?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Litter (including dog poop)	33
General cleanliness of area	10
General Noise pollution	5
General pollution	3
<u>Graffiti</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	53
Community Mentality	
Disrespect (internal)	12
Rudeness (External)	8
Outsiders/Interlopers (the Pacific Beach syndrome)	8
Insularity/ Polarization	4
Lack of Community Outreach/Involvement	4
“Locals Only” Mentality	1
<u>Feelings of being “Pushed out”</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	34
City Failing to Provide Services (including restrooms, Indifference of police, general maintenance)	21
Safety	11
<u>Lighting</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	34
Issues Surrounding Homelessness (including aggressive pan-handling, lack of services, the “able bodied” not working, concerns for their safety, helplessness in resolving issues)	28
Drug & Alcohol Abuse	21
Too many bars	5
<u>Too many marijuana clinics</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	28
Parking & Traffic	12
Airplane Noise	2
Housing costs	1

Figure 5

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

Describe the kind of community you desire Ocean Beach to be?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Respect (including peaceful, courtesy, accepting, kindness, diversity, tolerance, non-harassment, nonjudgmental, and patience)	43
Community Focus	
Community working together (including church outreach)	
Family orientation, friends and children)	20
Proactive problem solving	8
<u>Recognizing complexity of the issues</u>	<u>2</u>
Total	30
Ocean Beach as a Place	
Back to Village Concept	8
History & Tradition	5
Community Hall or Meeting place	3
A Place of Welcome	2
<u>More Neighborly</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	19
Reducing Homelessness	5
More Bathrooms & Showers	5
Stop Aggressive panhandling	4
Central Services for those in Need	4
Free Camping or Safe place to sleep	1
<u>Make OB <b>not</b> the best destination for homeless &amp; drunks</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	20
Safety	13
Cleanliness	8
More integrated and responsive police	6
Less alcohol (bars)/drugs	5
Less Aggression	4
Less Crime	2
Less Partying	3
Upgrade Image of OB	2
Street Fairs focused on community not business	1
Improve Affordability	1
Nude Beach	1

Figure 6

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

What is in the way of making Ocean Beach the kind of community you desire?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
<b>Community</b>	
Lack of Respect/Patience with others	25
Taking Responsibility and Lack Cooperation	19
Lack of Knowledge of Resources/Agencies	5
Lack of Unity	4
Lack of Communication	4
“The Sticker”	3
Perceived Obstacles to solutions	3
Lack of Pride	1
Lack of Community Outreach	1
Poor Community Image	1
<b>Homelessness</b>	
Lack of Shelter/Services (including funding for Mental Health)	9
Lack of Facilities (including bathrooms, showers, sleeping place)	6
Panhandling	2
Area Churches encouraging the homeless by feeding those	2
<b>Agencies</b>	
Ineffective/out of touch law enforcement	5
Lack of respect/communication with City Hall	4
OB Town Council out of touch with residents and focused on Business, realtors, developers	3
Economics/Affordability	14
Drugs/Alcohol (including too many bars, marijuana clinics, head shops)	5
Street Cleanliness	2
Fear/Stress	2
Lack of God	1
Lack of Affordable Housing	1
Television	1

*Figure 7*

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

What resources do we have to make Ocean Beach the kind of community you desire?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
People (including volunteers)	24
Desire	2
Pride	2
Faith Community/Churches	18
Programs to feed the needy	5
Community/Coming Together	16
Traditions	5
Acceptance	1
Social Capital	1
Spaces to Gather	4
Mental Health Services/AA	4
Pro Community Businesses	3
Police Presence	3
Beaches	3
OB Town Council/Main Street Merchants Assoc.	2
Money	2
Gardening/Greening	1
Social Workers	1
Neighborhood Watch	1
Library	1
Fire Station	1
Schools	1
Voting	1

*Figure 8*

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

What resources do we need to make Ocean Beach the kind of community you desire?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Accessibility of Resources, including Grants, Websites, Regularity Of Services, Health Clinics, Mental Health Services, Assistance From Existing Agencies	33
Law Enforcement, specifically better communication, integration, Sensitivity and presence	14
Shelter including a drop-in for services, or emergency	13
Community Collaboration (forums, gatherings, less division, address Issues)	12
Community Center	6
Community Garden	5
Alternate Food Programs	4
Building with the Faith Community	2
Leadership	2
Community Court	2
Encourage Human Dignity	2
Involvement	1
Community Clean-up	1
Regular OB Town Council Meetings	1
More Restrooms including showers	8
Job Assistance	5
Mentoring	4
Accountability of Public Officials	4
Low Income Housing for Families	3
Homeless ID Cards	3
Low Cost Veterinarian Services	2
Bus Tokens for the Needy	1
Social Workers for the Streets	1
Homeless Art Show	1
Unbiased Media	1

*Figure 9*

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

How do we address the threat to peace in our community this summer and beyond?

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>
Respect Each Other	9
Faith Community as Leaders & Mediators	5
Prayer	3
Communicate/Listen	7
Address Conflicts with Involvement and Inclusivity	7
Random acts of Caring and Kindness	6
Realize Violence in acts or words in not a solution	5
Peace Begins with me/us	4
Work with the Police	4
Smile and say, "Hello"	3
Acceptance of Others	3
"Don't paint all with one brush"	2
Patience, things take time including solutions	2
Less Media	2
Realize the Community includes all (age, gender, income, race...)	1
Resist Polarization	1
Share with one another	1
Be Kind, but Assertive	1
Actions cause reactions (aggressive panhandling causes aggressive Discrimination)	1
Stop the Stickers	1
Create a Safe Community	1
Create a Safe Place to Camp	1

*Figure 10*

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

## Conclusion of the Forum

When the final peace circle reported completion with the issues, the attendees were thanked for their participation and a promise of a report. A benediction was given by Reverend Steven Drescher of Bethany Lutheran Church.

The attendees lingered in small groups, continuing to speak with one another. What had started as a polarized community forum, ended with diverse little groups shaking hands, and exchanging hugs.

The forum concluded at 10:15 p.m.

## Follow-up to the Forum

On July 27, 2010, the Inter-Faith Community of Ocean Beach met to discuss a format and direction for the follow-up agenda<sup>3</sup>. The discussion was based upon the preliminary findings from the forum.

Based upon the findings, and input from the community subsequent to the forum, the following was decided.

First, because cleanliness of Ocean Beach is a major issue, an Alley clean-up was viewed as a community event. With support from the Ocean Beach Town Council, and the Main Street Merchants' Association, it was agreed to have the community to select a particular alley way to clean up. Ideally the alley selected would be one which serviced merchants and residents. The first clean-up would follow the Saturday morning Breakfasts for the needy provided by Second Chance Ministries, at the First Baptist Church. Tentative dates selected are either August 21 or 28, 2010.

The clean-up was viewed as the beginning of ongoing community process, selecting a particular alley, notifying the residents and merchants who lived on the alley, and starting after the Saturday morning breakfasts to involve the homeless community, and other community volunteers.

Second, the Inter-Faith Community, agreed to host a second forum on August 24, 2010. The most likely venue will be the hall at the First Baptist Church, a location adequate to hold a large number of attendees. The focus of this forum will be on several action items identified by the previous forum and the anticipation of creating community committees to address the manner in which those items may be achieved (i.e. bathroom facilities, or a drop-in emergency shelter).

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<sup>3</sup> At this meeting, the Inter-Faith Community was joined by Harbor Presbyterian Church and Oasis Ministries.

## Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

As with the initial forum, the action items and rules for the attendees will be posted prior to the forum. It is anticipated there will be continued involvement from the members of SDRJMP and the Inter-Faith Community.

This report will be made available in PDF format at the churches of the Inter-Faith Community, through the OB Rag Blog site, the SDRJMP website (SDRJMP.org) and forwarded to the media outlets which attended the forum.

# Report from the Open Forum regarding the Issues of Homelessness in Ocean Beach

## Appendix A

### Peace Circle Facilitator Checklist

- 1) Have everyone introduce themselves.
- 2) Read the rules once more, and ask for questions.
- 3) Have everyone (including you) sign the rules.
- 4) Explain when the talking piece is passed to the participant, he or she has three options:
  - a. Speak about the issues presented in the question;
  - b. Sit quietly and hold the talking piece to reflect upon what has been said; or
  - c. Simply pass the piece to the next participant.
- 5) Explain each participant may share as much or as little as he or she desires, but in deference to the other participants, please keep sharing to three minutes.
- 6) Take a moment for everyone to quietly focus on the task at hand.
- 7) Pose the first question...and give your input, as an example.
- 8) After the talking piece has gone around one time, ask if anyone would like to comment on what has been said. If so, pass the talking piece to that participant.
- 9) Take a moment to very briefly summarize points made, then pose second question following the same procedure.
- 10) At conclusion of all the questions, another moment of silent reflection.

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## Appendix B

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"