

'Jobs, Not Jails,' Skid Row Protesters Shout at Politicos

By Anat Rubin
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The crowd of politicians and police officers paced to the chants of angry protesters.

A phalanx of TV cameras took aim at an empty podium on a conspicuously clean corner of Skid Row.

The press conference was running late, and the protesters had no intention of quieting down.

Officials elected and appointed — a cross section of local politicians — took their places behind the podium.

State Sen. Gil Cedillo, City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo and police Chief William Bratton joined them.

Off to their left, a woman began shouting to someone who wasn't there, saying something about the "the savior of the greatest municipality in all the world."

The politicians were befuddled, but the police officers know this turf. They tried gently to guide her away.

The officers tried to talk a few demonstrators into quieting down, into letting the officials speak.

But the crowd from Los Angeles

Community Action Network, yelling "Jobs, not jails" and "Build more housing," was armed with an advance copy of what city officials were about to propose.

And they didn't like it.

They didn't like Gil Cedillo's "sentence enhancements" for drug crimes on Skid Row.

They didn't like barring anyone on probation for drug offenses from the so-called "downtown recovery zone."

They didn't like the absence of specific plans for permanent, affordable housing downtown.

And they didn't like more things than can be catalogued here.

Their objections left Los Angeles City Councilwoman Jan Perry and Central City East Association Executive Director Estela Lopez at a loss.

They appeared not to know how to proceed.

Finally, Cedillo stepped up to the podium.

He began reading from a prepared speech.

"We are here to talk about the prob-

See Page 7 — CROWD



The crowd from Los Angeles Community Action Network yelled "Build more housing" and "A Cell Is Not a Home" during a press conference about new legislation.

Crowd Steals Show at Press Conference

Continued from Page 1

lems that plague Skid Row," he said. "Skid Row is a disgrace."

A voice from the crowd yelled, "You helped make it that way."

More shouts followed.

"It's action that transcends rhetoric," Cedillo said, his voice barely audible.

In what seemed like an extemporaneous comment, he added, "It's action that transcends protests."

The protesters, most of them wearing bright orange shirts, only became louder.

"They got to you, too, Gil?" they shouted. "Who are you listening to, Gil?"

It was called a press conference to introduce a new package of legislation that, in Cedillo's words, would punish "those who prey on the poor" on Skid Row.

The legislation, a package of law enforcement initiatives, would impose longer sentences for those caught selling drugs, restrict the activities of those on probation, prohibit what city officials have called the "dumping" of homeless people downtown, and make it possible for police to remove those deemed "in need of services" to available beds elsewhere.

It also proposes that emergency shelters and service providers be located in other neighborhoods as part of what advocates call "fair share zoning."

The corner of 6th and San Julian, next to the Midnight Mission, suggested a connection between the law enforcement initiatives being proposed and the homeless encampments of Skid Row.

But for Friday's press conference, the encampment was nowhere to be seen.

The scenario only served to underscore what downtown activists see as the disconnect between local politicians and

those living on the streets.

As the crowd shouted, "A cell is not a home," Cedillo introduced Bratton.

He thanked the media for coming to "see firsthand the conditions we are trying to change."

'Most of the dope dealers are addicts themselves. Adding penalties doesn't solve that. It's just a way of cleansing this community of people who live here so that more gentrification can take place.'

Michael Key,
Community Action Network member

"We know clearly we cannot arrest our way out of this problem," he said. "It's too big, and it's not fair."

"This legislation will allow us to focus on the drug dealers and those who prey on the weak."

Community Action Network member Michael Key said the proposed legislation is not about protecting people on the streets but about making it easier for the city and the business community to get rid of them.

"Most of the dope dealers are addicts themselves," he said. "Adding penalties

doesn't solve that. It's just a way of cleansing this community of people who live here so that more gentrification can take place."

Key, an African-American, as were most of the protesters, accused the politicians of trying to "bleach" the community.

Delgadillo walked up to the podium with more resolve. He shouted into the microphone.

"The tragedy of homelessness is compounded by indifference," he said, his pages flying away from him in the wind.

The crowd, now louder, changed the chant to "We want a home."

Perry began her speech in Spanish, but her bilingual efforts didn't do the trick. She followed with the English version as the crowd chanted, "Build more housing."

"The people of this community have been subjected to different, lower standards," she said. "This is a matter of respect for all people."

Bill Rosendahl was the first elected official to acknowledge the metaphorical elephant shouting on the street. He addressed the protesters directly.

"We want more housing," he said. "We want permanent housing with supportive services."

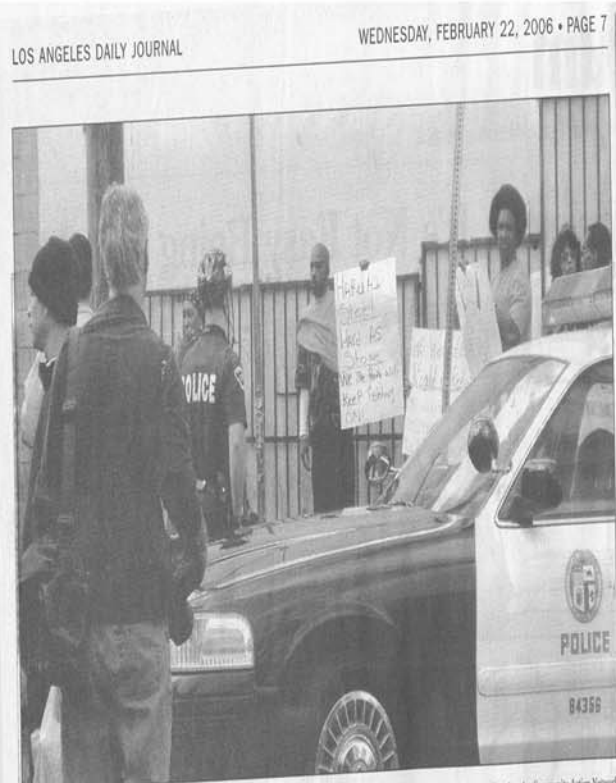
But his nod to the demonstrators was too late.

Now the crowd was chanting, "Show me the money."

Money, they said, is what it would take to build permanent housing with supportive services.

Cedillo returned to the podium. He promised to protect "those who raise their voice and those who don't have a voice."

"Hey Gil, where's our voice up there?" Key shouted. "Who represents us up there?"



Politicians, police officers, reporters and TV cameras watch as angry protesters from Los Angeles Community Action Network chant on a conspicuously clean corner of Skid Row while waiting for a press conference about new legislation to begin.