

## Region & State

### Tiny Pirate Radio Station Shut Down

Federal officials seize the facility's equipment. Free speech is argued in liberal Santa Cruz.

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Skidmark Bob leaned back in his chair behind the makeshift radio studio desk as he assessed the impact of last week's shutdown of the pirate station Free Radio Santa Cruz by U.S. marshals and the Federal Communications Commission.

Agents yanked the antenna from the roof and carted off all of the broadcast equipment Wednesday, effectively knocking the station off the air. They departed with a warning that operators of the station faced possible fines of up to \$10,000.

"At least they didn't take the pirate flag," Skidmark Bob, as he is known, said Friday.

Behind him hung a large, black-and-white flag adorned with a skull and crossbones, a key symbol of Free Radio Santa Cruz. Surrounding him were shelves filled with alternative music CDs that provided the staple of the station's broadcasts. Political commentary that tended toward the far left.

By Friday, the station's volunteers and supporters had assembled enough computer and audio equipment to send programming on the Internet. Skidmark Bob, whose real name is Robert Duran, vowed that the station would be back on the air soon, thanks to backup equipment stashed at another location. The station might relocate to get away from federal agents, he hinted, but he said it had no plans to give up squatters' rights to its radio frequency.

"We decided to take this frequency because we felt the public airways belong to the people," Duran said.

Around Santa Cruz, that sort of power-to-the-people rhetoric strikes a receptive chord. A college town of 55,000 people in a place where liberal political posturing is so pervasive that the City Council once adopted a resolution calling for the mayor's impeachment.

The council has twice adopted resolutions supporting Free Radio Santa Cruz, both times in response to inquiries about the pirate station.

"Obviously, pirate radio isn't protected by the Constitution," said Mayor Scott Kennedy. "But we are concerned about government restricting free speech."

The council also is concerned about the war in Iraq, medicinal marijuana and many other issues, all brought up during meetings that even Councilman Mark Primack, who cosponsored the latest pro-pirate-station resolution, says get tiresome.

"Santa Cruz is a little bit of a fantasy town," Primack said. "This is kind of like a resort for liberals."

With 15,000 students, UC Santa Cruz exerts a powerful influence on the city and its politics and has helped create an atmosphere that Primack finds appealing and enigmatic.

"This city wants to be tolerant and open to new ideas. It's my job to make that happen," he said.

The station is run as a sort of commune, with no designated leadership. Participants pay \$20 a month to join and listen to air programs. Skidmark Bob is one of the original members of the station, a one-time wanderer who found his way to Santa Cruz, liked it and stayed, sleeping in his pickup truck at first. He became an advocate for the homeless and a volunteer with an organization called Food Not Bombs that served free meals.

Duran and about a dozen other volunteers and activists got together in the 1990s and raised about \$1,000 -- enough to buy a watt transmitter and audio equipment to launch a station barely powerful enough to reach more than a few miles. They used an open radio band and began broadcasting from a friend's carport.

Within a year, two FCC agents had shown up. In its warrant for the latest raid, the U.S. attorney's office in San Francisco documented the FCC's pursuit of the station starting in May 1995.

David Doon, an electronics engineer in the FCC's enforcement division, documented in an affidavit how he used tracking equipment to hunt down the location of the pirate station as it moved several times over the years, switched to a different frequency and boosted its power to 50 watts, enough to cover the city with its signal.

FCC regulations require radio transmissions to be licensed as part of the agency's task of regulating the airwaves, but exceptionally weak transmissions are allowed without a license.

In May, Free Radio Santa Cruz moved again, this time to the old Victorian house that serves as student cooperative headquarters. It looks like a throwback to the Haight-Ashbury of the 1960s. The paint is mostly weathered except for a band of blue across the second story. A Volkswagen camper van, its top popped, clearly hasn't moved from the driveway for a long time.

The station itself is in a 10-foot by 10-foot room with a ceiling so low that 6-footers might feel the need to duck.

Agents tracked down the station again, and this time the U.S. attorney's office in San Francisco filed a complaint on Wednesday that allowed agents to shut it down.

After agents hustled station volunteers and house residents outside, volunteers soon began calling each other and a crowd of 40 to 50 gathered to watch the dozen federal officials conduct the raid.

Federal marshals complained after the raid that local police had provided no support in the raid, and that tires on had been slashed while agents were at the house. Police were investigating the vandalism Friday.

Kennedy described it as a heavy-handed show of force. This was, after all, Santa Cruz, he pointed out, and city of problem with what Free Radio Santa Cruz was doing.

"Marshaling this overt police action at a time of war against a relatively harmless radio station seems like a such distortion of priorities," Kennedy said.

Duran said the station has received considerable support from around Santa Cruz since the raid. "This has really he said.

On Friday night, the station's webcast was up and running, offering its brand of maverick music and irreverent co

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