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Skid row: Hoarding trash on sidewalks isn't a right [Blowback]

February 28, 2012 | 12:45 pm

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Estela Lopez, executive director of the Central City East Assn., which represents downtown L.A. businesses, responds to The Times' Feb. 22 editorial, "L.A.'s skid row property rights." If you would like to write a full-length response to a recent Times article, editorial or Op-Ed, here are our [FAQs](#) and [submission policy](#).

If the real issue facing homeless individuals on skid row was their inability to safely store medicine, identification or personal documents, the Los Angeles Police Department and City Atty. Carmen Trutanich would not be appealing the preliminary injunction granted by U.S. District Judge Phillip S. Gutierrez, which bars seizing unattended property left on sidewalks and other public places.

Personal photos and prescription drugs aren't creating health hazards on our streets; huge piles that resemble debris are. The real issue is that skid row is again being asked to tolerate something allowed *nowhere* else in the city of Los Angeles -- an unlimited number of personal possessions (tents, shopping carts, mattresses and furniture) to be stored in the public right of way, even in front of people's homes and places of business.

Severe mental illness and addiction dramatically alter a person's judgment; not surprisingly, unsanitary hoarding is quite a common problem among skid row's homeless.

And though it isn't pleasant to discuss the condition of those belongings, simply imagine what your possessions would be like if you stored them outside for weeks, months or even years. Imagine what your clothes would smell like if you lived in them for weeks without bathing while sleeping on contaminated sidewalks that reek from excrement. Imagine what your food might be like sitting on that same sidewalk. Imagine what your mattress might incubate.

The choice is not one of compassion versus cruelty. Life on skid row is more complicated than that. Unfortunately, it is easier to defend the homeless' right to unlimited and unsanitary possessions on

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the sidewalks of our community than it is to create affordable housing and fund social services. I would dare those who defend the injunction -- including The Times' editorial board -- to allow the same individuals presently on skid row to place their soiled blankets, tarps, sofas and chairs in a heap in front of their homes or businesses.

(A quick aside: I drive by The Times' building on 1st and Spring streets every day on my way to and from my office on skid row. I see homeless individuals by the bus stops and on the steps of an abandoned park across the street. But those who sit or lie in front of The Times' building are often escorted away by security.)

Gutierrez's decision did not bring justice; in fact, it wronged all involved. We disrespect skid row's housed residents by allowing nightmarish conditions outside their homes; we disrespect the investment of hardworking small businesses and their employees who face deplorable conditions and disgusted customers; and we allow the unsheltered to live in a state of squalor that, in many instances, only serves to hasten their premature deaths on the street.

Those who are critical of this injunction don't dispute the right of the homeless to have personal property; it's about whether it is safe, sane and civilized to allow limitless and hazardous possessions to occupy the sidewalks that belong to everyone.

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— Estela Lopez

Photo: Downtown Los Angeles business owners cite trash left on sidewalks by skid row's homeless residents as a major concern. Credit: Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times

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