October 11, 2007

Los Angeles to Permit Sleeping on Sidewalks

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 10 — City officials agreed Wednesday not to enforce an ordinance used to bolster police sweeps of homeless people sleeping on sidewalks until 1,250 units of low-cost housing are built.

The police in recent years had used a 1968 law barring sleeping or lying in public spaces to arrest homeless people in and around Skid Row, a downtown district whose concentration of 10,000 to 12,000 homeless people is among the highest in the nation.

But a federal appeals court last year struck down convictions under the law, calling it one of the most restrictive in the country and cruel and unusual punishment, because of the area’s severe lack of housing for homeless people.

Under the settlement reached between the City Council and the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, which had sued the city in 2003 on behalf of six homeless people, the city will allow sleeping on sidewalks from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. People will not be able to bed down within 10 feet of the entrance of a building, parking lot or loading dock.

The policy will remain in effect until Los Angeles builds 1,250 units of low-cost housing with services for homeless people, with half of the units in and around the downtown area.

The City Council president, Eric Garcetti, said he expected it would take at least three years to meet the target, at a cost of $125 million. Mr. Garcetti said he expected the city to finance at least half of that, with nonprofit organizations and developers footing the rest of the bill.

The city agreed to the settlement “because in doing so we can move the city forward toward our shared goal of ending homelessness,” Mr. Garcetti said. He said it would take effect immediately, though it would be nullified if the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit rejected a joint motion to be filed soon by the city and lawyers for the homeless to end the case.

Mr. Garcetti said he doubted the city would allow the police to resume enforcing the law once the housing is built, though he suggested that by then the city would have adopted other laws intended to address the homeless problem.

Ramona Ripston, executive director of the A.C.L.U., called the settlement important and “satisfying.”

“We don’t believe people should have to sleep on the streets; we would like there to be a house or a shelter bed for everyone, but until that happens people have to sleep somewhere,” Mr. Ripston said. “What this does is permit people to sleep throughout the city, not only on Skid Row but anywhere in the city without the police disturbing them.”

Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Los Angeles Coalition to End Homelessness and Hunger, an
advocacy group, said the amount of housing provided in the settlement was too little, and he fretted that the police would resume cracking down on the homeless once the housing is completed.

“It is incredibly disappointing that there would not be more vision on the part of the city to address our homeless crisis,” Mr. Erlenbusch said.