

hit streets for peace

by Dave Wilcox
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A peace rally Saturday evoked memories of Vietnam-era protests, as nearly 1,000 marchers chanted anti-war slogans and clogged downtown San Luis Obispo sidewalks.

"Hell no, we won't go, we won't die for exaco," chanted a group of protesters as they walked east up Higuera Street.

Signs carried by many marchers suggested American troops have been sent to the Middle East merely to protect oil fields - Saturday's primary theme.

"How many males per gallon?" read one of the signs. "Blood for oil? A bad trade," said another.

"I think the American people are being sold a lot of garbage," said Los Osos resident Karen Antonel.

Asked why she was at the protest, she said, "I've been sitting back. I just felt it was time to do something."

Many who showed up Saturday echoed that sense of urgency.

"I'm so frustrated I feel like I have to do something," said Vicki Bookless.

Bookless, 51, said she has a son in the army, although he remains stationed in the U.S.

Like many others, Bookless said she's never marched in a protest rally before Saturday.

"It's not just the predictable people who are here," said Richard Kranzendorf, a longtime county activist.

Among the marchers were high school students and grandmothers, parents with infants and teens clutching skateboards.

Protesters walked two and three abreast, one point stretching two blocks down both sides of Higuera Street, between Morro and Nipomo streets.

Rally organizers said the turnout far exceeded what they expected.

"Somebody said 700 and somebody said 1,000. I'll settle for either of those," said



Robert Dyer/Telegraph-Tribune

Nancy Culver of Mothers for Peace helps carry banner Saturday heading up some 1,000 peace marchers in SLO.

Richard Kresja, a leader of the group Passion for Peace, which sponsored Saturday's event.

The large turnout appeared to signal increasing opposition locally to the Bush Administration's handling of the crisis in the Persian Gulf. Earlier local demonstrations drew far fewer protesters.

Bush is deploying more than 400,000 troops in Saudi Arabia and has convinced the United Nations Security Council to authorize those troops to fight if Saddam Hussein does not pull his forces out of Kuwait by Jan. 15.

County Supervisor David Blakely, the day's main speaker, set the tone when he linked Saturday's gathering to the days of Vietnam protests.

"Ordinary people remember the mis-

takes of the Vietnam War. ... The needless cost of the Vietnam War, which we'll never stop paying."

Blakely accused Bush of avoiding a congressional debate on his gulf policy because he would be unable to justify committing so many American troops without a clear objective.

"George Bush has put America on a track toward inevitable war," said Blakely. "Bush is preparing to send American men and women to die in a war that does not need to be fought."

Blakely also urged other local officials to become involved in a public debate about the gulf crisis.

For some in the crowd, Saturday's march brought back protests that occurred 20 years earlier.

"That brought back flashbacks, those sirens," Annette Bray told some friends after hearing a nearby police car.

Bray said she's been protesting "my whole life," including rallies against the Vietnam War.

The Grover City resident said she has a niece and a brother stationed in Saudi Arabia.

"I don't want them to die. I don't want anyone to die."

Other marchers weren't even born when the U.S. pulled out of Saigon in 1975.

Fourteen-year-old Alethea Levi said she was marching Saturday "because I don't believe in the war."

Responding to the same question, Leia Maahs, 15, said: "I don't want to see any of my friends drafted."