

MERCHANTS HOPE TO RECLAIM SIDEWALK FROM HOMELESS LOUNGERS



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

ABOVE: Tulsi Shaki and Zipolite Emerys play music Thursday afternoon on Pacific Avenue near Soquel Avenue. **BELOW:** Arturo Vargas sets up tables and chairs near Sushi Now!, where the owner says the crowd of self-described 'gypsies' is making it impossible for customers to sit and enjoy a meal.

Expanded kiosk seating seen as possible solution

By DAN WHITE
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — They call themselves “homeless children” on a spiritual journey.

But Sushi Now! owner Matisse Selman calls them loiterers and said they are strangling his kiosk business near Pacific and Soquel avenues.

The group, which sometimes thumps guitars and plays bongos, will have to go elsewhere if the city approves a new plan. Selman and fellow kiosk restaurateur Ali Khah want to expand their outdoor seating, creating two patios that would displace people hanging out near the businesses.

Planters would separate the dining area from pedestrians.

The City Council is expected to vote on the plan Tuesday.

The young people say they are being blamed for Pacific Avenue problems that have nothing to do

with them.

The city leases the kiosks to the merchants. In a Dec. 20 report to the council, city Redevelopment Director Ceil Cirillo wrote about large numbers of people blocking the sidewalk, making it harder for the kiosks to attract customers and creating “an inappropriate area for serving food.”

Selman, 25, said loitering has been “overwhelming” for the past six months. He said people sometimes smoke right in front of diners’ tables.

“I ask them to leave and they yell and swear,” he said. “One of them spat halfway into the garbage can and sucked it back in to get back at me.”

Selman said some in the crowd are friendly, “but overall, it’s just a nightmare.”

Mayor Christopher Krohn said he’s heard merchant complaints but hopes for an amicable solution.

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Loungers

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"Downtown is for everybody, and we have to figure out how to all get along and not have one group or another dominate the atmosphere downtown," Krohn said.

But solving the problem could be tricky. Khah, owner of the Ali Baba falafel kiosk, said he doesn't want to just push the young people to another part of the city. He said some of those who gather at the corner are nice, but others bring negative energy.

"I accept the kids the way they are," Khah said. But he added that the expanded seating also makes good business sense.

Merchants complain that more than 50 people sometimes hang out at the spot. On Thursday, there were only about a dozen. The young hanger-outers — who look like they've stepped through a time portal at a 1970s Grateful Dead concert — swear they're a peaceable group getting a bad rap.

Most are in their 20s, and wear dreadlocks or ponytails. They wear loose, flowing fabrics and some say they are "gypsies."

"I can't believe they are trying to move us away," said Zipolite Emerys, 22, who said he's been on the road four years. "We have just as much of a right to hang out here as anyone."

Emerys said he's "houseless" by choice, once worked in construction and asks for spare change to help support himself.

"Some people work their whole life and are angry because I can hang out and talk to people that I love and play music," he said.

A few seemed resigned to moving.

"The shops were here first," said a



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Merchants in the sushi and falafel kiosks downtown say some of the loiterers are friendly, but others cause problems.

woman named Brooke. "(But) they are going to make sure it's hard for us to go anywhere else."

The city doesn't consider loitering illegal, but bans obstructing pedestrian or car traffic, lying on public sidewalks or a curb,

or sitting on a sidewalk within 10 feet of a building entrance or window, 4 feet from a drinking fountain or public telephone, or 50 feet from a cash machine.

Non-aggressive panhandling is permitted downtown.

Usually "if you're not in somebody's face, you're OK," said Lt. Tom Vlassis of the Santa Cruz Police.

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