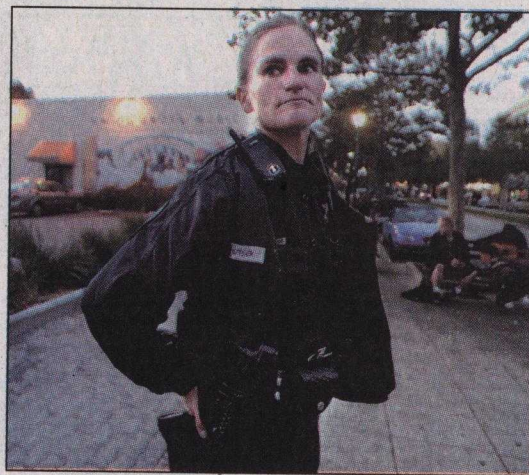


# Walking a Fine Line



Downtown patrols face tough balancing act: Fight crime, preserve city's unique character



Santa Cruz police officers Elizabeth Butler, top, and Sgt. Dan Flippo, above, keep alert on Pacific Avenue.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

New program keeps same officers patrolling heart of S.C. for at least two years

By SHANNA MCCORD  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Officer Elizabeth Butler is friendly, but with the stern edge of a parent or teacher she tells a teen to pick up his skateboard and take a hike.

The parking lot planter box he's been sitting in at Pacific Avenue and Elm Street is off limits.

"You know you can't sit here," Butler says to the young man, who had been hanging out

on the corner with a pack of friends.

"I'm always reminding him that the parking lot is private property. It's a lot like parenting with all the reminders."

Butler describes her job patrolling downtown Santa Cruz as a mixed bag of public relations and fighting crime.

Nearly every day she confronts homeless people, shoplifters, drunks, people fighting, drug deals, panhandling, vandalism and

## City's top sales tax producers

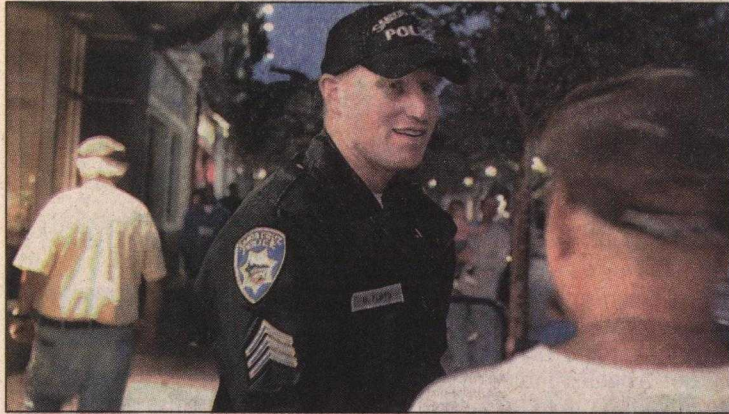
Determined by geographical area. Numbers based on third quarter sales for 2004

Eastside	\$513,000
Downtown	\$270,000
Mission Street	\$161,000
Boardwalk/Wharf	\$150,000
Gateway Shopping Center	\$77,000

Source: City Manager's office

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*'Not a lot of cities our size have a successful downtown. A lot of cities would love to have what (Santa Cruz has).'*

MARTIN BERNAL, ASSISTANT CITY MANAGER

*'Just to learn the different nuances (of downtown Santa Cruz) takes time. It would take someone four months just to get comfortable ... and then they were gone and we'd have to gear someone else to that position.'*

SGT. DAN FLIPPO, LEFT







Santa Cruz police officer Elizabeth Butler patrols the southern end of Pacific Avenue.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

# Downtown: Visiting Pacific Avenue 'is always interesting'

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tourists asking how to get to the beach or wondering who has the best burger in town.

Butler and the eight other police officers assigned to downtown — the blocks between Cedar Street and San Lorenzo Park, and Water and Spruce streets — either walk or bike the beat. They're a team, part of a new policing strategy that was unveiled at the start of the year.

The officers spend a lot of time strolling up and down Pacific Avenue, often seeing the same people and the same issues day in and day out.

In fact, many of the downtown homeless know Butler by name and she knows theirs.

"You have to be a people person down here," Butler said. "I really do know people's names. You know their names, you know the ones who have problems with narcotics."

Watching over downtown is a high-profile, high-pressure beat for police officers because of the area's role as the center of the city.

Downtown is the focus of ongoing improvement efforts, and always under the microscope of business leaders and city officials

## Laws of Pacific Avenue

- Dogs are not allowed.
- Panhandling is allowed, but not in front of a store, not within 50 feet of a cash machine and not at night.
- Non-commercial displays, such as political messages, must move every hour and not be in the same spot within 24 hours.
- Lying on the sidewalk is not allowed.
- Sitting on the sidewalk is allowed, but not within 14 feet of a building or window.
- Skateboarding is not allowed.
- Bikes and backpacks cannot be left on the sidewalk or set against a wall while entering a store.

striving to keep it safe for visitors, and thriving for the economy.

Largely leveled by the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, the area has been almost entirely rebuilt save a few lingering sore spots that remind folks of the devastation inflicted 16 years ago.

Pacific Avenue and the surrounding streets are now packed with restaurants, upscale boutiques, shoe stores, movie theaters,

book shops, coffee houses, concert venues, beer joints and bars.

In all, 285 businesses make up the downtown, which is the city's second largest sales tax base.

Each year the downtown district generates roughly \$1 million in sales tax revenue, assistant city manager Martin Bernal said. The Eastside is the city's No. 1 sales tax producer, bringing in about \$2 million a year as a result of the car dealers, Bernal said.

"Downtown is a big segment of the economy of Santa Cruz," he said. "Not a lot of cities our size have a successful downtown. A lot of cities would love to have what we have."

## Downtown details

For police officers, patrolling downtown means walking a fine line.

Several city laws were designed specifically for Pacific Avenue, which creates a steep learning curve for mastering the beat.

For example, dogs are not allowed on Pacific Avenue — the only street in the city where that is the case. Also, a host of rules apply to panhandling, sitting on the sidewalk and displaying signs.

"There's extreme sensitivity with any kind of enforcement down there," said police Lt. Rudy Escalante. "The people there want to be able to do what they want."

It's an area of town where First Amendment rights are more likely to be raised. People often set up tables, gather signatures or hold signs to push political agendas. Musicians playing guitar or beating a drum on the sidewalks of Pacific Avenue, or a homeless person begging for money are common sights. All of which is fine, police say, as long as it's not done directly in front of a store and loca-

tions change every hour.

There also are a few oddities not found in other areas of the city, such as the guy in pink who carries an umbrella and spends his entire day walking at a snail's pace up and down the street.

The eccentrics who commune downtown mean the officers must do their job "with a sense of calm-

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# Downtown

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ness and communicate well with the people they're talking to," Escalante said.

In January, the police department changed its approach to downtown by making the beat a special unit that requires greater commitment from officers. By doing that, the department hopes to bring more consistency to the types of tickets written and arrests made, and create a higher level of comfort for visitors.

Instead of rotating in and out of the downtown beat every four months, the way other beats in the police department work, downtown now requires a commitment of two to four years by officers, police Sgt. Dan Flippo said.

Officers interested in the beat must write a letter stating why they would like the assignment, explain what they can add to the coverage and offer suggestions as to how downtown can be better patrolled, he said.

"Just to learn the different nuances down here takes time," Flippo said. "It would take someone four months just to get comfortable with that and then they were gone and we'd have to gear someone else to that position."

Though officers feel significant improvements have been made during the past eight months, downtown is still subject to image problems, business owners say.

"It's an evolutionary thing," said Artisans Gallery owner John Lisher, whose store has been vandalized. "Police have to constantly be patrolling."

Some love downtown and look at it as the city's social scene, while others hesitate to go there because of its reputation as a spot for homeless and young punks to gather.

Police, along with city officials, are trying to reverse a negative image and make downtown "a brighter, cleaner, vibrant place to be," said City Councilman Ryan Coonerty, who started the Downtown Improvement Task Force in April — a group of city leaders, business owners and police officers who meet every other week to address downtown issues.

Things the task force has planned so far:

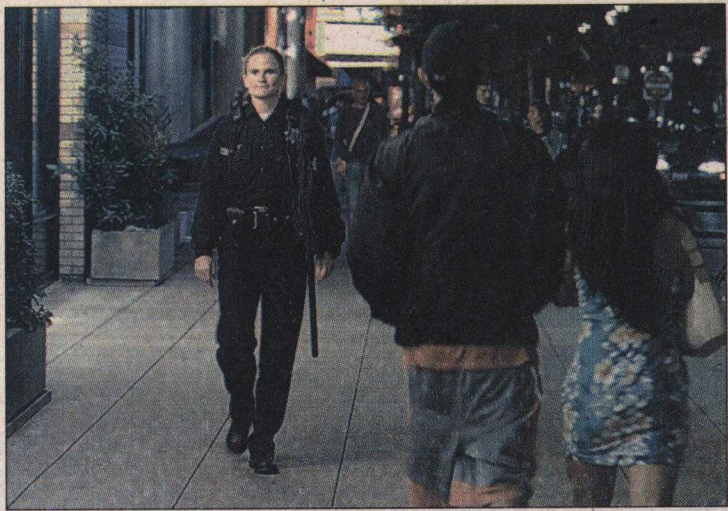
- Power cleaning the sidewalks.
- Lights professionally hung in the trees on Pacific Avenue.
- New, larger trash bins, and another trash pick up on weekends.
- Better signs for parking.
- Remodeling public bathrooms.

## 'Hassled too much'

Susan and Glenn Goepfert, Pasatiempo residents who ate dinner at Clouds Friday night, agree that Pacific Avenue is beautiful and there are "some nice things worth seeing and doing," but they don't come downtown often.

"You get hassled too much," Susan Goepfert said. "It's just ridiculous. You can't walk down the street."

Each visit downtown "is always interesting, but sometimes it's just



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

'You have to be a people person,' says Santa Cruz police officer Elizabeth Butler of dealing with people downtown.

over the top, especially when you have kids," Glenn said.

Public perception, though, is hard to change — especially on the south end of Pacific Avenue below Cathcart Street and especially at night, police say.

The south end, police say, tends to be seedier and experience more problems than the northern half, where rents are higher and the retail scene is more thriving.

"It's definitely busier and we get more calls for service on the south end," Flippo said. "There's more alcohol outlets in a smaller area. You are going to have more issues with that."

Mike Mekis, owner of Andy's Auto Supply on Pacific Avenue, says his shop is the repeated target of graffiti. He said he replaces the store windows every other year because of heavy scratch marks etched by vandals.

He said it's also common for people to urinate or defecate in the parking lot behind his store.

"During the day we have all these people just hanging out and trying to get money from people," Mekis said. "My customers are tired of being panhandled or hollered at, but the city says these people have rights to be where they are. They have a right to holler."

Mekis, whose family has owned the auto supply store for 56 years, would consider switching locations if they didn't already own the property.

"I don't feel the city has strict enough rules for this area," he said. "We love the city, we just don't like south of Cathcart."

Police say Pacific Avenue and Elm Street demands a lot of their attention, because it's a place where teens and homeless can legally loiter.

Cigarette butts, food wrappers and empty beer bottles are often left behind at the corner.

After the bars close, alcohol-fueled trouble starts, and "we have constant drunk arrests and people passing out," Flippo said.

Plus, he said, "the fights go way up at night."

On a busy night downtown, Flippo says officers make about 20 arrests.

A really busy night, he says, is when all officers on duty are pulled from other beats to help downtown.

Pacific Avenue, love it or hate it,

is one of the busiest and most popular spots in the city.

Keith Holtaway, executive director of the Downtown Association, says there are currently no vacancies for ground-level retail space.

## Street is alive

"The street is alive, absolutely alive," Holtaway said. "I'm not going to put blinders on and say we're perfect, but what Santa Cruz has on its streets is pretty much what every other city has on its streets."

Holtaway's job with the Downtown Association is to encourage Santa Cruz County residents to come downtown and spend their money.

The association recently wrapped up shooting footage to use for a 30-second television commercial that bills downtown Santa Cruz "as the place to come," Holtaway said.

Holtaway and other business owners praise the work by police officers in helping make downtown more inviting.

The continuity of the officers' presence and their quick responses to troubling calls have made a difference just in the past eight months, many say.

"I think downtown gets a bad rap sometimes," said Drew Miller, whose insurance sales office is on Pacific Avenue. "At times it's more comfortable than others, but I've always liked it."

Kathy Bisbee of Cruzio the Internet Store said her company enjoys its location south of Cathcart Street.

The worst experience they've had in several years was a tea bottle being thrown through the front door in the middle of the night, she said.

"This end is changing," Bisbee said. "We do need a lot more parking down here. That would really help out a lot."

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