

'Ride 'em out of town' gone forever

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SANTA CRUZ — Police Chief Jack Bassett pledged his support to downtown businesses in their fight to clean up the mall, but said the days of billy clubs and "ride 'em out of town" are gone forever.

Speaking at the Downtown Association's annual meet-

ing Thursday night, Bassett pledged the cooperation of the Police Department in addressing problems on the mall. He said the police officer's role is "to combat crime, not change political, social or economic values."

It was Bassett's first formal meeting with the Downtown Association since he was named police chief and came on the heels of a jury's verdict Tuesday which

cleared four former officers of charges they conspired to beat street people.

The charges stemmed from incidents from November 1979 to April 1981. Bassett came to the department as chief in November 1982.

One businessman questioned Bassett's public statements about the outcome of that trial. All four were

tried and found innocent, the businessman said, "Why don't you want those good cops?"

Replied Bassett, "I believe quite strongly they stepped out of their role as police officers." Once that happens, Bassett said, "it creates a credibility problem."

The businessman complained he has seen crime

increase since the four accused officers left the Police Department. "I could call them and get results," the businessman said. "Now the police officers know the drug dealers and panhandlers and they joke with them and tell them to move on instead of arresting them."

The Police Department has undergone a great test of values; of right and wrong, Bassett said. "I am very proud of the people in the Police Department. There is a great deal of professionalism and, contrary to belief, they are not overjoyed with the verdict. More than 90 percent of the officers were shocked." Actions which led to the charges, Bassett said, "are not condoned or respected."

He asked, "Who sacrificed because of that trial? You, me, city government and those officers. We are all paying the price very dearly because they stepped out of their role."

The cost of the trial, plus pending suits against the city, Bassett told the merchants, would pay for a lot of broken windows.

During that trial, the former officers and others said they were pressured by merchants to use any means to get illegal campers, panhandlers and drunks out of town.

Larry Pearson, the Downtown Association's new president, also made reference to the trial. "This association never has and never will endorse or condone the kinds of activities which led to the trial," said Pearson.

"Those tactics are unhealthy for the community and never will have my support," he added.

Most of Bassett's speech dealt with what his new police administration's response is going to be to concerns by the merchants.

"The Santa Cruz Police Department is committed to the people and businesses downtown," Bassett said. Like the merchants, Bassett said, the Police Department is interested in the economic well-being of the mall. Without that health in the core of the city, he said, disease will set in and spread.

Bassett, who came to Santa Cruz from Santa Ana, said he saw that city's downtown area become diseased and start to die. The Orange County Jail was just nine blocks from downtown. Twenty-six police departments booked prisoners there, but "none came back to get them," he said. They were released onto the downtown streets and soon muggers and drug dealers replaced shoppers.

Major stores began to move to shopping centers and were replaced by bars and pawn shops which catered to the new downtown population.

As police commander for the downtown Santa Ana area, Bassett said he brought the Police Department and merchants together and they let it be known on billboards and on the radio they had joined forces to combat crime.

He brought the merchants together with judges and soon stiffer sentences were meted out. The word soon got out that if you're out to break laws, don't go downtown, said Bassett.

Businesses were beginning to return to downtown Santa Ana as he left to become police chief here last November.

Bassett suggested the same kind of cooperation in Santa Cruz.

Major problems on the mall, Bassett said, are drug abuse and mental health. "There is a drug abuse problem at the street level," he said, echoing a remark made last month by Sheriff Al Noren that Santa Cruz is a West Coast drug capital.

County law enforcement officials have asked the federal government to open a Drug Enforcement Agency office here to help them stop the flow of narcotics.

As for the second problem, he said, "Even if you picked up all those with mental health problems, there would be nowhere to house them."

Bassett said creative solutions are needed. "Politics control, politics make change," said Bassett, "and should be used to adjust priorities."

Earlier in the meeting, Pearson said a goal of his term will be "issue advocacy" to make business' opinions felt.