

Mall dilemma: street people

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SANTA CRUZ — The biggest single issue affecting the economic rebirth of downtown Santa Cruz is the problem of street people, Vision Santa Cruz members said Monday night.

Businessman Larry Pearson, who chairs Vision Santa Cruz' Rehabilitation Subcommittee, said street people have long presented a knotty social problem for the city,

but now with 40 percent of the downtown destroyed by the October earthquake, they are taking on a new role as an economic barrier to reinvestment.

Pearson and other Vision Santa Cruz members made it clear they were talking about street people and not the truly homeless.

Pearson said that replacement buildings will cost more, which, in turn, will mean higher commercial rents. Many previous retailers will not be able to afford to return.

In order to secure adequate financing, some property owners will have to attract retailers from outside the area, Pearson said.

But the first question they are being asked by prospective tenants is what is the city going to do about the street people, he said.

That was the the biggest concern of Gottschalks department store officials, Pearson said. Gottschalks decided to sell its downtown property instead of rebuilding.

Pacific Western Bank Chairman

Phillip Boyce said a prospective major office tenant's major concern was the street people problem.

Pearson said his subcommittee recommended that the city direct one of its staff to take on the issue of street people, but Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt called for a fresh approach.

"This is a real issue. I hear it, too. It's a problem and we have to grapple with it," Wormhoudt said. But she and former Mayor Michael

Rotkin said it is a question that the city has been unable to resolve.

They both suggested that Vision Santa Cruz appoint a task force to tackle the problem. "It's a subject that needs the thought of a new group of people," Wormhoudt said.

"When people ask me what are we going to do, I give them the same answers I have for years," she said. "We need some new ideas," she said.

"All you'll get from the city is rhetoric," added Rotkin. "I know, I

did it, too," he said.

Most member of Vision Santa Cruz agreed that options are limited and much of what some people would like to see done would be illegal.

Some members suggested that the biggest problem of all may just be the perception that downtown is overrun with anti-social and criminal behavior and that the emphasis should be shifted to the positive aspects of the mall.

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In the end, Vision Santa Cruz decided to form a task force, chaired by someone from the City Manager's Office, to tackle the issue.

Pearson said that elevating the issue to the City Manager's Office would be a good signal to the investment community.

Police Chief Jack Bassett already is on record as opposing the recreation of a garden atmosphere downtown, as recommended by Vision Santa Cruz' design consultants.

"I strongly disagree with the concept of formal garden areas, courtyards (and) outdoor performance space unless these areas are private property and used for the intended purposes," Bassett has written. "Open public space will be abused criminally and will be a policing nightmare," he said.

"The terms 'extended garden' and 'intensely landscaped' will in my mind require three to four times the staffing to maintain basic public safety," he said.

The Police Department recommends that casual gatherings be discouraged by removing benches

and planter boxes and that as much space, as possible, be made private property through lease or sale so that trespassing laws can be enforced.

In addition to the street people problem, questions about financing reconstruction and the uncertainty about the futures of key buildings are slowing the rebuilding process, Pearson said.

Vision Santa Cruz voted to urge the city to work with the owners of the St. George Hotel, the Trust Building, Ford's and the Del Mar Theater to quickly resolve problems that block the return of those sites to commercial activity.

In the case of the St. George, Pearson pointed out that the unresolved question of whether the hotel should be torn down or repaired is holding up reconstruction of the entire north mall area.

Finally, Vision Santa Cruz voted to recommend that the city reach out to property owners by offering workshops on financing construction and by appointing planners and a design consultant to counsel the owners to facilitate rebuilding.