

A tale of downtown Santa Cruz

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Downtown

8.24-86

FOR YEARS, downtown plans have been discussed to improve traffic, improve architecture, improve zoning, and any number of other topics. The last six months differ from the past because these plans and improvements so long debated are now under construction.

Most visible are the numerous parking and street improvements. In fact, during the last year the city has spent more than \$3 million on new capital improvements in the downtown area. These projects include the second-deck addition to the Front and River parking lot, three new parking areas, traffic improvements along Cedar, Front and River streets, and the much maligned Soquel Bridge replacement has been completed. The projects respond to the changing nature of Santa Cruz — we drive more, we work more, and we shop more.

What other changes will the future bring? Exciting projects now being discussed are the conversion of the downtown jail to a cultural and commercial complex, improvements to the San Lorenzo River aesthetics and flood-control capacity. Numerous other small projects include better signs and lighting. Will these changes affect downtown? Yes, to a



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certain degree, but to succeed, new and old must be compatible.

Other changes are more subtle and less visible to the public. Downtown merchants have now hired an executive director to coordinate the promotion of the Business Improvement Area. The results will be more visibility in terms of sales, promotions, cultural activities and other

exciting events in downtown. The city will also be installing additional street lights. This, combined with business owners maintaining night lighting in store fronts, downtown will be enjoyed for extended hours. In addition, the city has assigned full-time police officers to assist and ensure security for all who stop, work and live in downtown.

Downtown is unique in that a good portion of the Mall has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This is a distinct honor and recognizes downtown Santa Cruz in the history and culture of California. The downtown neighborhood is also a place of history and charm. Tourists and residents alike can enjoy the neighborhoods' new ambiance of the street trees, flowers and pedestrian improvements. Witness the new landscaping and street improvements at Union and Chestnut streets which have neatly combined traffic safety and aesthetics.

What comes in the future will be a continued mix of improvements to ensure downtown remains a competitive commercial environment and cultural resource. Assuredly, there will be more discussion and debate over future improvement. But the important fact is these changes are now taking place. The improvements under construction

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when completed will answer some of the requests for improved parking, transportation, marketing and cultural activities.

Many of these needs can only and should only be met in downtown Santa Cruz.

(Marybeth Richardson is the executive director of the Downtown Association of Santa Cruz.)