

Stricter downtown rules face final vote

Pacific Avenue behavior targeted

Pacific Avenue
By DAN WHITE
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

7-23-02
SANTA CRUZ — A divided City Council is expected to take a final vote tonight on downtown ordinance revisions that increase space restrictions on panhandlers and ban hackey-sack playing and prolonged leaning against buildings.

Ordinance revisions — proposed in response to complaints about aggressive begging and general obnoxiousness downtown — will be first on the agenda at the council's 7 p.m. session.

Revisions would make sign-holding panhandlers subject to the same limitations as panhandlers who call out to passersby, and ban blocking sidewalks with belongings.

Councilwoman Emily Reilly said she's heard complaints about a few sign-holding panhandlers cursing at those who don't give them change. Critics call this rule inhumane.

Last week the council voted 5-2 to make a first reading of the ordinances. It only would take a 4-3 majority to make the rules official. The rules would take effect a month from now.

Some backers say the city's reputation for tolerance or even permissiveness promotes a free-for-all atmosphere, and that the revisions would at least send a strong message that intimidating behavior won't be tolerated.

"We feel the perception of safety would be increased should the current efforts to revise the downtown ordinances be approved," wrote Mark Junod, a Santa Cruz resident who shuns Pacific Avenue.

Another constituent, Claire Sommargren, congratulated the council "for having the courage and vision to approve (revisions) cleaning up Pacific Avenue,"

Please see **RULES** on **BACK PAGE**

Rules: Council divided

Continued from Page A1

she wrote.

But the city leaders heard words of caution from the steering committee of the Santa Cruz Action Network political group and the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz, an agency which works to aid the poor. Both groups want tonight's decisions postponed.

SCAN played a role in the elections of three council members, Christopher Krohn, Keith Sugar and Tim Fitzmaurice, the only council members to vote against any of the proposed changes last week. Krohn and Sugar voted no on the entire package of proposed revisions, saying the process was rushed, while Fitzmaurice voted to give preliminary approval to most of them except for a revision that bans leaning on buildings.

Christine Johnson-Lyons and Paul Brindel of Community Action Board told the council that panhandling is a traditional way for poor people to meet financial needs and is protected free speech. They wrote that they appreciated the need to respond to anti-social behavior but "talking or holding a sign is not illegal."

Detractors say the changes don't address vandalism and drug dealing and will cause more problems for political tablers, musicians and non-aggressive panhandlers.

At the last meeting, Sugar asked police for more information about downtown calls for police response. Friday, Police Chief Steve Belcher

Detractors say the changes don't address vandalism and drug dealing and will cause more problems for political tablers, musicians and non-aggressive panhandlers.

submitted a survey of arrests from 1994 — when the city drafted some of the strictest restrictions on panhandling in the nation — to 2000.

The results show a near doubling of total complaints requiring police response since 1994, but not a rise in serious crime downtown, in spite of fears stemming from incidents this year: a drug overdose in a portable toilet, a stabbing outside Borders Books, a gang-related shooting that wounded two.

The survey results show an increase in total downtown arrests over the past three years, from 1,045 in 1999 to 1,202 last year. The number of arrests was higher in 1997 and 1998.

Contact Dan White at
dwhite@santa-cruz.com.