

# Downtown commons probed

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## Public square could expand urban opportunities, officials say

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SANTA CRUZ — Members of the City Council's Redevelopment Committee have asked staff to research whether one of the vacant lots downtown could be turned into a public commons.

"We have so many elements of a terrific urban environment downtown," said Councilman Scott Kennedy, who floated the idea at a committee meeting Wednesday. "But every great city has a public space, and we have none."

Turning Kennedy's vision into reality won't be easy. Among the obstacles:

- Finding a property owner willing to lease or sell a suitable site.
- Squeezing money from a Redevelopment Agency budget already wrung dry by previous commitments, or interesting enough citizens in contributing to such a project.
- Overcoming concern that a public area downtown would become a magnet for more street people.

● Figuring a way to manage the facility, either with city staff or through a private organization.

Kennedy's idea may not be easy to execute, but it does have supporters.

"I think every city needs a public space," said Linda Steinau, executive director of the Downtown Association. "It just really seems like something we're missing. ... As long as there were some control element, it would be great."

Thomas Mantle, president of the Downtown Association, said the idea had "appeal," and deserved close scrutiny.

"I think like any other new idea, we have to look at it with new eyes," said Mantle, downplaying concerns that such a facility would draw more street people downtown. "I really don't think a fear of a handful of people should be dictating our public policy. ... We have to determine what's best for the citizens of Santa Cruz and our visitors."

The idea for a public commons in the

downtown area isn't new. It was one topic on the table when members of Vision Santa Cruz discussed how the area should be rebuilt after the 1989 earthquake.

"People felt it was so urgent to rebuild downtown ... that the whole idea of public space focused on a discussion of so-called social issues," said Kennedy. "What we've learned is we've already got those problems anyway. Not having an open space hasn't solved it, it's just put them on the sidewalk."

But a more mundane concern — money — may derail Kennedy's idea.

A few property owners with vacant lots downtown already have development plans, and wouldn't likely consider losing money by selling open land for a public commons.

The remaining properties whose owners have no plans for development could be ripe for a long-term lease agreement, said Kennedy, but that poses problems, too.

"One drawback (of a lease) would be

that ... people could come to feel it theirs," said Mantle, who envisioned a Berkeley People's Park scenario where citizens would try to block the property owner's right to develop when the long-term lease is over. "I'd hate to do something where we're setting ourselves up for a major donnybrook down the road."

Kennedy acknowledged that such a scenario could come to pass, which is why he favors buying the site outright, either with public money or through a large-scale fund-raiser.

He emphasized that a public commons wouldn't necessarily be a park, but could include water sculpture, a stage for theatrical or musical performances, kiosks, and open space for events like the farmers' market that now require streets to be closed.

"I think every great urban environment has a public commons, a place where people gather for theater and music, a place where families can go," said Kennedy.