

Tents proposed for downtown

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SANTA CRUZ — A plan to erect tent-like structures near the Pacific Garden Mall in time for holiday shopping moved ahead slightly Tuesday.

Business owners pressed the City Council to give them some kind of sign that it intends to move quickly on a plan by the Downtown Commission to put up tents in city-owned parking lots along Cedar Street.

Time is of the essence, the owners said, and there is much to be done before the first tent rises.

"I know if I'm not open the day after Thanksgiving, I'm bankrupt," said Margaret Wilson, owner of Lily Wong's.

She asked for a show of support from the city because, she said, she is hearing many merchants say they don't believe the tent plan is workable, so they are looking for space elsewhere.

"We want to keep Pacific Avenue as an intact commercial street," Downtown Commission Chairman William Rubel said. "It is important to make the street come alive as soon as possible."

The tents, manufactured by a company called Sprung Instant Structures, are made of fabric stretched over aluminum framework. Company representatives said they could be delivered and erected in about 2½ weeks after ordered. Interior improvements including lighting, shelving and other display structures could take anywhere from a couple of days to a week.

The cost of leasing 50,000 square feet for a year would amount to nearly \$250,000.

But, no one knows where the money would come from. The project is not eligible under Federal

Emergency Management Agency guidelines, but some state money could be available, Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt said.

She said she had a promise and a handshake from a state Department of Commerce official for \$50,000 Tuesday. She said there also is \$150,000 in state money for promotion she would try to get for Santa Cruz.

Merchants would be expected to pay rent after getting back in business.

The council was eager to move ahead but wary of the lack of specifics. Councilman John Laird said, "We're doing this without anything in writing and by the seat of our pants."

But Laird also made the motion to get the project started, with "a strong statement we want to make this happen."

The council agreed to meet at 4 p.m. Thursday to hear further updates on the plan and to begin thinking about the more long-term issues facing the city's downtown commercial core.

Wormhoudt said, "My guess is it'll be a cliff-hanger every single day." She said she wants to see the downtown plan work so she can go shopping.

Other options to salvage holiday business include opening the Bank of America building and the Art and History Center — the old County Jail — to retailers to divvy up. The city of Scotts Valley has agreed to provide a 6,000-square-foot mobile building, which could be placed on a parking lot or vacant lot.

According to Rubel, the city of Whittier used 24 trailers in its downtown parking lot for retailers following the 1987 earthquake. The last trailer was removed last September.