

Santa Cruz OKs revised 'looks law'

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With purple hair, tattoos and pierced tongues coming out losers, the Santa Cruz City Council on Tuesday approved a rewritten version of its controversial anti-discrimination ordinance.

By a 5-2 margin, the council passed the first reading of a narrowed "looks law" and set April 28 as the date for its final vote.

The latest version significantly curtails an earlier proposal that would have banned most job and housing discrimination against people with offbeat grooming, hairstyles or clothes — a concept that has brought national ridicule to Santa Cruz for the last three months.

A five-member task force that included gay activists and a chamber of commerce representative submitted the compromise version.

Like its predecessor, the new ordinance

still would make it illegal for employers or landlords to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, height and weight.

But the key change Tuesday was the switch in language from "personal appearance" to "physical characteristic."

"We've clarified it," said Councilman Neal Coonerty, who authored the ordinance. "We got it back to its original intent."

Coonerty said the new language protects people who have suffered disfiguring birth defects or scars from major accidents such as fires. But it no longer includes people who voluntarily have changed their appearance with tattoos, unusual hairstyles or body piercing — all of whom are regularly seen in Santa Cruz.

Already protected by state and federal laws are: age, gender, race, color, creed, religion, national origin, marital status and disability.

The new version also downgrades a vio-

lation to a \$100 fine, rather than a misdemeanor. It still relies on an independent mediator to settle claims before a dispute goes to civil court.

The personal-appearance change eliminates much of the controversy surrounding the issue.

From the moment the ordinance was introduced, business owners complained that the sections on personal appearance were too vague.

Although it would have been a crime to refuse a job to an otherwise qualified applicant because of his or her appearance, exceptions were provided for grooming or dress that posed a health hazard.

Some dress codes were allowed, as long as employers required compliance by every worker and did so for a "reasonable business purpose."

Trouble was, no one really knew what that meant.

Coonerty acknowledged that problems

with the wording of the original law "rapidly got out of hand." Reporters from such prominent outlets as Cable News Network, the New York Times, Time and Newsweek all pounced on the issue, pointing to it as another flaky California trend.

"It's obvious once it was introduced that there was confusion and need for some clarification," said Coonerty.

Coonerty, a first-year politician, endured intense criticism. He said his primary intent was to ensure gay residents the rights that were included in Assembly Bill 101, vetoed last year by Gov. Pete Wilson, but the debate focused on the appearance section.

The Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce issued a terse letter questioning the need for the law but extending "support (of) the revised language."

"I'm happy with it now," said Coonerty, a longtime bookstore owner.