

Santa Cruz cancels New Year's Eve event

Events
By David L. Beck

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First Night Santa Cruz, the public New Year's Eve celebration that at its height drew more than 30,000 people downtown, has canceled this year's event — a victim of grim economic times as well as its own generosity.

Board President Trink Praxel said Monday that the non-profit group plans to rethink what it has been doing and restructure its financial base in hopes of returning for New Year's Eve in 2003.

Other First Nights — there are said to be 180 such alcohol-free

celebrations, most of them in the United States — have also been struggling. "Every First Night that I know of lost money last year," said Marc Murai, who resigned earlier this month as executive director in Santa Cruz. "People just didn't buy buttons," or tickets.

First Night Santa Cruz traditionally booked dozens of musical and theatrical acts, from baroque and folk to rock and reggae, and placed them in halls, storefronts, churches and auditoriums downtown, including several outdoor stages. The buttons, which usual-

ly sold for \$12 in advance, gained the wearer admission to all venues.

But the color, the crowds, the costumes, the parade and the outdoor events were free. "That's part of what your mission is, to turn that city into a magical place," said Naima Kradjian of Binghamton, N.Y., executive director of First Night International.

The trick, she said, is to "educate the populace" — that is, persuade people to buy buttons even if they don't plan to attend — as a contribution to the community.

Button sales provided half the event's revenue, Praxel said.

The rest came from donors. A partial list includes the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, AT&T Media Services, Nokia and the city of Santa Cruz, all of which have had to tighten their belts.

Impelled by a drunken riot the previous New Year's Eve, Santa Cruz began its First Night in 1994, which actually would have been Dec. 31, 1993, since First Nights take the number of the dawning year, not the dying one. Its best year was First Night 1998, said

Praxel, when 15,000 buttons were sold.

The millennium celebration featured a longer, fancier parade and more fireworks, but its extra cost meant it "was not the great success we were all hoping it was going to be," Praxel said.

Last year, the year of Sept. 11, depressed spirits were dampened further by a week of rain, and sales were off 20 percent. This year "was going to be a down-sized event" anyway, she said.

In its healthiest year, the event had a budget of \$350,000. This year's would have been \$220,000,

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"which gives you a sense of how scaled-back we were looking at."

Praxel said the plan is to "do something on New Year's Eve," probably the parade, to "keep a presence," and then return next year for a 10th-anniversary First Night celebration.

First Night Monterey, Santa Rosa and Stockton — the only other such celebrations in Northern California — are expected to go on as usual this year.

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