

# Tattoo parlors may be allowed in Watsonville

Commissioners to debate ordinance allowing first tattoo shop in 45 years

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For the first time in 45 years, Watsonville residents looking to get tattooed may be able to head to Freedom Boulevard for their inking when the Watsonville Planning Commission debates a revamped "body art" ordinance tonight at 6:15 p.m.

A proposed ordinance recommended by city staff would allow tattoo and piercing parlors, but limit them to areas with less crime and push them at least away from 300 feet from bars and 500 feet from schools, parks and other body art sites. Owners would also have to apply for a \$1,300 special use permit and undergo a background check and fingerprinting by the Watsonville Police Department.

According to city planner Suzi Aratin, the police department had expressed concerns about setting up body art establishments in high-crime areas. That means Main Street is out for any new body art shops, while possible sites include the thoroughfare commercial district, which includes some sections of Freedom and Airport boulevards.

Although there have been tattoo parlors in Watsonville's history, they have basically been banned since 1962, when the city required that tattoos be performed only under the supervision of a licensed physician. In Capitola, a similar ordinance was also passed in 1962.

If approved by the Planning Commission and the City Council, the new ordinance would most closely mirror a body art ordinance

See TATTOOS, page 2

## TATTOOS

From page 1

in Monterey County, which also requires new parlors to undergo training and provide Hepatitis B vaccination permits before opening new shops, Aratin said.

In terms of concerns over gang-related tattooing, Aratin said that "is likely a freedom of expression issue.

"There's nothing we can do that says, 'You can get Bugs Bunny, but not Tweety,'" she said.

More important, Aratin said, is keeping shops out of high-crime areas, away from kids and with the additional requirement of an operator permit like those required for taxi cab and ice cream truck drivers as well as massage therapists.

Planning Commissioner Rhea DeHart said she was in favor of the restrictions in the staff report, especially regarding training requirements.

She does have some qualms about the concentration of tattoo shops along Freedom Boulevard, adding that as it develops into a more inviting thoroughfare, a concentration of tattoo parlors may not be ideal. Tattoos are part of a cultural shift that may require new thinking by city officials, DeHart added.

"I see loads of men and women who have them, and they're not members of gangs," she said. "It's a cultural shift. What we used to view as drunken sailors, now it's very acceptable. I have granddaughters who have them."

The move toward revising the 45-year-old ordinance was spearheaded in part by Santa Cruz attorney Kate Wells, who threatened to sue the city for barring tattoos, calling them a First Amendment right. Wells' son, Jeff Wells, hopes to open a tattoo parlor in Watsonville.

After reviewing staff recommendations, Kate Wells said she was pleased that the city staff came up with a workable ordinance so quickly. Along with head shops and medical marijuana dispensaries, the City Council voted in January to issue a moratorium on tattoo parlors in order to craft revised ordinances.

"For the most part it seems fair," Wells said. "I think they tried to strike a balance between the overly detailed Monterey County one and the completely loose Santa Cruz ordinance."

Wells said she looked forward to understanding exactly which locations would be viable in Watsonville.

"I understand them not wanting to have it in the downtown area," she said. "Those are reasonable restrictions."