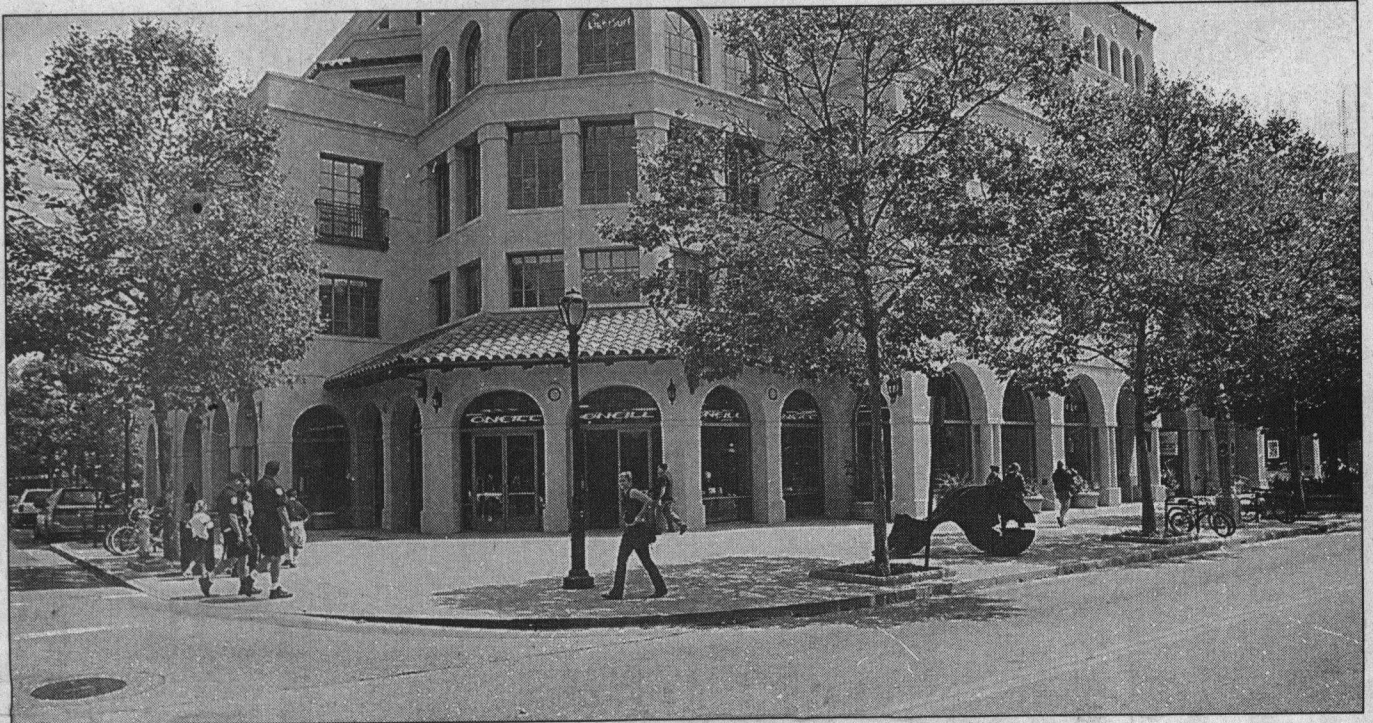


Downtown fights 'problem of culture'



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

The corner of Cooper Street and Pacific Avenue was the scene of a massive gang brawl on Friday.

Police say city becoming hot hangout for area gangs

By JASON SCHULTZ
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Police say downtown has become a hangout spot for Central Coast gang members who come looking for trouble.

"They come and they hang out, and they know they will see each other and it will become confrontational," said Sgt. Steve Clark.

SANTA CRUZ Police on Monday said they are still investigating a massive gang brawl that occurred late Friday night on Pacific Avenue. Police have made no arrests in the melee, which started at 11:30 p.m. on the sidewalk across from Cinema 9. As many as seven fights erupted in the area during the next few hours.

The fights reportedly started when a 17-year-old Capitola man saw several young men picking on one of his friends and went to intervene, according to the 17-year-old's sister, Sandra, who asked that her last name not be used. The Capitola teen was stabbed three times. He suffered a punctured liver and narrowly avoided surgery, his sister said. He remained at Dominican Hospital on Monday afternoon.

Sandra said her brother's friends, who witnessed the stabbing, reported the attackers were dressed in red, which shows a gang affiliation. She said her brother is not a gang member.

Nearly a dozen police officers and as many sheriff's deputies rushed to the scene, Clark said. Many of the officers had been working



A fight nearly erupts as youths converge on Pacific Avenue near the Metro Center earlier this summer.

a double shift, and were in the Beach Flats neighborhood trying to stop a group of suspected gang members from throwing rocks at cars when the brawl was reported.

Friday night's brawl was the most widespread gang violence of the year downtown but not the first incident. In February, a suspected San Jose gang member was stabbed in front of the same theater. In April, two Watsonville men were wounded in an alleged gang shooting in front of a Pacific Avenue tattoo parlor.

Prosecutor Steve Drott says the suspect in that shooting, 24-year-old Henry Angel Huante, is a Santa Cruz gang member. Huante's family members say that's not true.

Clark said downtown has become a hangout spot for gang members. He said there is plenty of bars and things for gang members to do in those cities, so he thinks the gang bangers are coming to Santa Cruz looking for trouble.

"They also come to downtown to buy their marijuana because they know it can be found there," he said.

Clark said the let-it-be attitude of many city residents toward drug use, especially marijuana smoking, has helped create the situation.

"It's a problem of culture in the city," he said. "People have turned a blind eye for so long that the situation has become what it is. It's become a near-crisis situation, and now people are asking the police to come in and fix it. But it is going to take more than just the police."

Dave Thomas, a Beach Flats landowner, said city leaders have been "too laid back for too long," and thus have inadvertently contributed to the drug abuse, especially heroin abuse, that results in crime and violence all over the city.

Mayor Christopher Krohn did not return several phone calls to comment.

A resident who has lived in the Palomar Inn for six years but did not give his name said he thinks downtown has gotten safer in recent years. But he agreed there is a lenient attitude about drug use in the city.

He said last year he told two police detectives about a one-armed man who openly smokes pot in front of the hotel, and the detectives told him "our hands are tied."

"I don't know any other city where somebody can openly smoke pot on the street and get away with it," the resident said.

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