

EMPLOYMENT

City Council to tackle problem of joblessness

By JOAN RAYMOND
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Moved by emotional, sometimes tearful, testimony from laid-off electronics industry workers, City council members Tuesday voted unanimously to tackle the problem of joblessness caused by high-technology plant shutdowns and relocations.

Council members voted to pursue passing regulations requiring companies to

complete "economic impact reports" to address the human impacts of a potential plant shutdown.

The council voted to research what authority the city has to require advance notification to employees about pending layoffs; to ensure laid-off workers are given enough severance pay, health, insurance and other benefits; and to protect laid-off employees from debts and evictions until they can recover from job losses.

Council members also agreed to seek grants from the Economic Development Administration to stimulate the local economy; to lobby for changes in tax laws that give companies breaks in moves out of the country to cheaper labor sources; and an affirmative action program to advance the hiring of local residents first over out-of-towners.

Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt was directed by the council to meet with business and labor leaders, plus organizations like Jobs

City Council

Continued from Page A1

Or Income Now to address unemployment issues.

The meeting is to be held after city staff completes a report in June on what steps other cities have taken to address the issues.

About 1,100 county jobs have been lost in the past six months in the electronics industry, according to JOIN.

Council members, with Katy Sears-Williams, absent, made their decision after hearing more than an hour's worth of testimony from high-tech workers, local labor, JOIN and NAACP representatives about the plight of laid off workers, particularly those affected by plant shutdowns at Synertek Inc., owned by Honeywell Inc. of Minneapolis, and layoffs at Seagate Technology of Scotts Valley and Plantronics-Santa Cruz.

No company representatives appeared at the public hearing to give testimony.

The workers testified the loss of their jobs left them feeling worthless and humiliated, and caused financial, health and family problems, sometimes leading to alcohol and drug, domestic violence and child abuse.

They testified companies had not notified them about pending layoffs, had inadequate training and retraining programs; and alleged health and safety

problems at plant sites.

"Unemployment can make us feel worthless, like something is wrong with us. We feel helpless and humiliated," said one worker, Genevieve Piraino.

A former Synertek employee, Elizabeth Waddingham choked back tears, as she told how she felt she had lost her identity when she lost her job.

"They should tell you when they are going to lay you off," she said.

"I'm a real person. People forget what it's like not having a job."

Workers said they become depressed after layoffs and suffered high blood pressure, headaches, stress and other medical problems.

A former Synertek employee, Anga Villa, said she was faced with \$17,000 in debts when she lost her job.

"I thought I would have my job until I was ready to retire...nobody wants to hire me. I wonder what's wrong with me," Villa testified.

Said Jay Kincis: "I had a handle on my bills for the first time in my life, then I got laid off."

A Seagate worker testified she had had to lie to workers in her department, telling them a layoff was not pending.

JOIN director Jim Brough gave the council petitions with 800 signatures asking the council to address the problems.