

Topless protest at S.C. council

Pacific Avenue
Bare-breasted 'Mammary Manifesto' marks start of debate on downtown's social problems

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SANTA CRUZ — Night-time cable viewers saw something you just don't see on CNN: a live shot of a woman with a mohawk doffing her top and flashing the City Council to protest downtown "social control."

Two other young women and a man also went bare-chested Tuesday night while

reading their "Mammary Manifesto." It accuses the city of cleansing Pacific Avenue of colorful characters and its uniqueness, "shooting themselves in the foot" financially while scapegoating poor people.

The protest, which drew cheers, snickers, annoyed looks and a few gasps, came at the beginning of a long meeting to address shopkeeper, shopper and resident complaints about social problems on the city's major retail drag. Lewd comments to

women, loitering and aggressive panhandlers are among the alleged problems.

Councilman Mark Primack called the bare-breasted display a silly time-waster because the city has no plans to outlaw partial nudity.

"We're here to look at social problems, not to talk about their breasts," said Primack.

Prior to the meeting, the city Redevelh
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Peace park shelved

The Santa Cruz City Council has quietly pulled the plug on the downtown peace park, a project that drew strong public outcry after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Most of the \$93,000 allotted for the project has now gone back into the general fund. The lone dissenter was Mayor Christopher Krohn.

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Protest: Topless demonstrators angered at proposed downtown rules

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opment Agency hired a social worker for Pacific Avenue. The council agreed to look into a downtown working group to deal with ongoing problems, perhaps discuss a controversial pedestrian mall proposal, and take a harder look at loutish behavior.

Councilman Tim Fitzmaurice had an angry speech about rude males from all socioeconomic groups, trying to assert their dominance and "mark their territory" downtown by blasting music, revving engines and bothering women.

Three council members said they would consider a designated place for "chalk artists" to do their work. The proposal was in reaction to the recent arrests of three chalkers who deliberately flouted a 10-year-old city ban on "defacing the city sidewalk" as a means of civil disobedience. Other council members said a long-term group could at least discuss concerns of artists and small-time unlicensed peddlers.

The council agreed to meet at 1 p.m. Monday in the council chamber to discuss and possibly vote on ordinance revisions, hailed

by many merchants as a step toward ending out-of-control permissiveness, and denounced by activists as classist politics.

Among the topics: requiring panhandlers to stay 12 to 14 feet from store entrances; banning prolonged leaning against businesses; and banning hackey-sack because some elderly residents say they feel unsafe when young people fling objects near them.

Some speakers said it was absurd to have the "social and criminal" discussion because downtown is safe. Resident Craig Metz said daily headlines create a false impression that downtown is a "dangerous slum. ... It's ridiculous. The only problem is how boring and sterile it is."

Prior to the meeting, one north Pacific Avenue merchant who asked not to be identified agreed with the topless group's claim that other merchants are inadvertently "sabotaging" downtown by publicizing fears of isolated incidents.

Eight people complaining about social problems praised the council's efforts but were outnumbered at the meeting, with about 40 speakers dismissing suggested rule

changes as civil liberty violations. However, councilwoman and downtown subcommittee member Emily Reilly said the vast majority of public correspondence is from people who say downtown is seriously "out of whack" and not safe or comfortable enough.

Activist Sherry Conable chastised resident Henry Donnelly for using the word "bums" to describe street people, likening it to a racial epithet. Donnelly said the city is far too lax on vandals, and later offered a sarcastic apology to the "drunks" and "gangbangers" he may have offended.

But there were moments of reconciliation, too. Rose Widmann, 20, of the bare-breasted group, put her top back on and went outside to congratulate a senior citizen, Jan Tait, for telling the council she felt unsafe walking downtown.

"You're very brave," Widmann said.

As for toplessness, it's legal in Santa Cruz — and most coastal towns in the state — unless "lewd" behavior is involved. Some protesters, however, said they feared the city would ban partial nudity because this

issue is mentioned in a merchant petition asking for stricter downtown rules.

The council hasn't expressed much interest in anti-nudity rules. Nudity complaints are rare here, to the extent that a 1993 feminist-lesbian topless carwash fund-raiser on Mission Street drew scant complaint.

Tuesday's nudity, however, forced the cable TV crew to think fast. The public-access cable station briefly showed a frontal shot of a topless woman, but quickly focused on the women's bare backs.

Officials with Santa Cruz County Community Television said Wednesday afternoon they had received no complaints.

Council speakers said they were listening to all sides of the downtown debate.

"We have heard a lot of complaints about behavior and preserving civil liberties," committee member and Councilman Ed Porter said. "Both groups have legitimate concerns. We want to preserve a balance."

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