



ROBINSON KUNTZ/SENTINEL

Baba plays on Pacific Avenue on Thursday. He welcomes crackdowns on aggressive panhandling and other problems.

# Santa Cruz merchants looking at ways to help polish Pacific

*Pacific Avenue*  
By J.M. BROWN

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[jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com)

SANTA CRUZ — Talk to business owners and managers on Pacific Avenue and, without prompting, many will tell you the biggest threat to their livelihood is not the recession.

It's not the premium on parking, and it's not expensive leases.

**DOWNTOWN SANTA CRUZ**

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It's still the negative image they say many shoppers, diners and moviegoers have about safety downtown. And they say it's making the difficult task of surviving an economic slump that much harder.

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# DOWNTOWN

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"We need to bring people back here," said Nancy Gambino, manager of Noah's bagel shop. "If we get word out that we can get aggressive and make this happen, people will come back."

Gambino and NextSpace co-founder Jeremy Neuner organized a merchants' meeting Thursday to look at ways they could help police enforce recent public nuisance ordinances designed to discourage aggressive panhandling, loud street music and people, presumed to be homeless, from sitting for hours on a park bench, sometimes smoking cigarettes or marijuana. The gathering tapped into a long-standing debate in Santa Cruz about how to balance a desire to be welcoming and provide social services against a desire to maintain a vibrant, family-friendly downtown that's healthy for business.

Several other business owners who did not attend the meeting also said safety is their top concern.

Merchants acknowledge some of the people who linger downtown are down on their luck, living with mental illness or just quirky characters. But they are exasperated by chronic loiterers who approach customers just feet from a shop door and ask for money, or those who violate smoking and alcohol ordinances and curse at merchants who ask them to beat it.

Gambino and Neuner encourage downtown workers to report wrongdoing to police and sign citizen citations when an officer arrives. But that means they must be willing to attest in court to what they saw, which deters some workers.

On Thursday, Neuner suggested creating a rotation of business owners who will walk the avenue for an hour at a time to be an extra set of eyes and ears, similar to the Downtown Association's yellow-and-blue jacket hospitality staff. He said he approaches loiterers and orders them to leave, often with success.

"I'm not particularly interested in people's civil rights right now," said Neuner, saying that Santa Cruz has become too tolerant of vagrancy. "Sometimes we have to break sacred cows."

Councilman Don Lane, who volunteers at the Homeless Services Center, said panhandling and homelessness often get tangled up in the same discussion, when they are two separate problems the city is trying to address amid double-digit unemployment and slashed social services.

"People are absolutely right to be concerned about aggressive panhandling; it's both inappropriate on a human level and it's against the law," Lane said.

## COMING SATURDAY

Downtown business owners talk about how they are faring as the nation plows through a two-year recession and persistent unemployment.

"If people are poor and need some help, writing them a citation for sitting on a bench is not going to change that."

With police facing limited resources, the Downtown Association, a group that 550 businesses pay into, is working with the city to devise lasting solutions. But Chip, the association's executive director who only goes by one name, said the transient population and panhandling are complex, perennial problems.

"It's a constant issue," he said. "People are very frustrated and want to know how can we deal with this right now."

Terra Lynn, a buyer for Idle Hands, a boutique selling handmade jewelry and T-shirts on Pacific Avenue near Laurel Street, said she attended Thursday's meeting in the hopes that "our involvement is bringing awareness." She and Kyoko Mundell, owner of the Body Options clothing store on the north end of Pacific Avenue, said they are too fearful to confront drug dealers or aggressive panhandlers. Instead, they call police.

"I want to get involved, but I'm afraid to," Mundell said.

Lt. Rick Martinez, who supervises the police department's downtown unit, told merchants he will place additional officers downtown "to push back the wave again" but he needs their helping keeping it at bay. Martinez encouraged business owners to pressure city officials and judges to stiffen penalties.

He said a big problem is that the County Jail is just steps from downtown, making it easy for people who are arrested frequently for public intoxication at night to return to Pacific Avenue the next day. And as for municipal code violations, like the new smoking ban on Pacific Avenue, people have to rack up numerous citations before there are any substantial consequences.

"We're going to throw overtime at the current state of downtown again," he said. "But how do we sustain it?"

Baba, a barefoot musician who has played downtown for four years, said he understands merchants' concerns about aggressive panhandling and would support them signing citations for anyone out of line. He said he moves on or quiets down when business owners complain to him.

"A lot of us are just out here trying to make a living," he said.