

# Workshop will zero in on future of downtown

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SANTA CRUZ — The Pacific Garden Mall has been accused in the past of lacking many things: sophisticated shops, sophisticated shoppers and sophisticated security.

One thing Santa Cruz' downtown commercial hub does not lack, however, is ideas for revitalization 20 years after its creation.

In recent months, with downtown Santa Cruz facing an increased challenge from a soon-to-be expanded Capitola Mall shopping district, different groups, including city officials and downtown merchants and landlords, have been hashing out ideas on just what can and should be done to improve the Mall.

At least some of these ideas may take flight Wednesday at a workshop from 9 a.m. to noon at Loudon Nelson Community Center room 6.

The public workshop will include members of the Downtown Association of merchants, the city's Downtown Commission, three City Council members and city staff.

Among the items to be discussed is a report from the Downtown Commission regarding a city-backed plan that will take the Pacific Garden Mall into the 21st century.

The report says that any improvements should be undertaken by a partnership of public and private interests, which is needed to support the Mall's unique blend of uses and functions. These include serving as the city's commercial core, being a "park-like plaza," functioning as a corridor for pedestrians and vehicles, and "an unusual example of historic preservation," according to the report.

The Mall plan should be integrated with other downtown development plans, the report states, including the plan to turn the old Front Street jail into an art museum/commercial complex and a task force's proposal for the San Lorenzo River area.

In the report, the Downtown Commission traces the history of the Mall — from Chuck Abbott, who proposed the changes for Pacific Avenue, to the creation of an assessment district to pay for the Mall. The original plan was successful, concludes the report, "because it offered positive, constructive answers to real problems and because it had credibility."

The commission has identified a number of issues it says should be addressed as part of a credible plan to revitalize downtown. Among these:

- Current Mall landscaping should be "evaluated" with the aim of striking a balance between preserving existing trees, some planted two decades ago, and views of historic building facades.

- The location and style of lighting fixtures on the Mall "may not be appropriate at the Mall core," according to the commission report, which also says that downtown merchants and city officials should take a hard look at improving lighting on building facades and inside shops and businesses.

- The plan should include better signs for downtown, including signs directing shoppers and visitors to public facilities.

- The Mall study should also include a growth plan for downtown, including where it will expand and the best way to get into and out of the shopping area.

The report also takes aim at several controversial "policy" issues, including "clearer marking of areas for non-commercial activities." At present, street musicians play up and down the Mall, among informational tables set up by various advocacy groups.

In addition, the report states that

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safety and a "secure environment" on the Mall is a "high priority. The right to public access in both the daytime and nighttime must be protected for both the young and old, all groups." The Mall has long been home for a variety of dispossessed and, some say, possessed people, some of whom are homeless, others who are practicing lifestyles somewhat beyond the mainstream. Private security, plus additional police patrols, have been added to the Mall in the wake of complaints about panhandling and drug dealing there.

But advocates for street people and the homeless have accused the city and police of harassment and have been waging a high-profile series of protests urging relaxation of a ban on sleeping in vehicles and in public parks.

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ment study are not the only cards being dealt downtown. A group of merchants, city officials and landlords have also been meeting this summer discussing how to transform Santa Cruz's downtown mall into something resembling a suburban shopping mall.

Among their ideas: common hours for Mall businesses, central planning over what kind of shops come onto the Mall; assessments for security and maintenance; and cooperative marketing and promotions.

Wednesday's workshop also comes on the heels of conflicting reports on the economic health of downtown Santa Cruz.

Earlier this month, the president of the Downtown Association, mall merchant Terry Spodick, presented a study to the Chamber of Commerce that showed the city losing its share of retail and other sales to Capitola and Scotts Valley, among other areas.