

Downtown Association weathers protest

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SANTA CRUZ — A six-week campaign to stop mandatory assessments of downtown businesses ended in failure Tuesday night.

The 197 protest ballots counted at the council meeting represented only 33.7 percent of the total amount assessed by the city to fund the Downtown Association.

To be successful, the protest had to top the 50-percent level.

The association, a merchant-advocacy organization designed to promote downtown, not only got a unanimous vote of confidence from the council after the protest tally was announced, but also a cost-of-living increase in its annual budget.

"Excuse me, a one-third protest of a tax?" said Mayor Mike Rotkin in an attempt to downplay the number of protests. "I don't want to see the characterization of a one-third protest that, 'Wow, they just got their butts kicked.'"

Merchant David Plumlee, who led the battle against forced funding of the Downtown Association, was philosophical after the loss.

"I think this was a wake-up call (for the association), we got that at least," said Plumlee. "I'm disappointed in the numbers. I thought it was going to be higher than that."

Council members encouraged Downtown Association leaders to heed criticism voiced by protesters that too much emphasis was being placed on promoting retail businesses on Pacific Avenue north of Cathcart Street.

"The Downtown Association has survived, but it's been brutal," said Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews, who also asked protesters to get more involved and make changes from within the organization.

Merchant Neal Coonerty, who pays one of the highest assessment rates because of the size and location of his Bookshop Santa Cruz, was among the dozens of business owners who supported the Downtown Association.

"I urge the council, don't play the role of Dr. (Jack) Kevorkian and participate in an assisted suicide of downtown," he said.

Opponents, however, suggested that too many businesses were not getting adequate bang for their assessment bucks. Many also were upset about being forced to pay for an association that they believe should be supported through voluntary membership fees.

"These (protest petitions) represent, in my opinion, an overwhelming response ... that the Downtown Association is being given a vote of no confidence," said Plumlee.

Councilman Scott Kennedy, who likened the protest effort to a game of "political hardball," encouraged assessment opponents to "accept the fact no successful protest was waged and move forward."

In the wake of the strong protest movement in the past month, members of the association's board of directors already have vowed to pay closer attention to the needs of all members and work on ways to address complaints.