

Downtown *Pacific Avenue* 'hospitality' program is approved

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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz will have a "hospitality" program instead of a "host" program, since hospitality was deemed a male gender-based word. And it will be enacted despite protests of street people who condemned it as criminalizing the poor.

Dozens of Pacific Avenue regulars, many of whom said they are homeless, tried unsuccessfully Tuesday night to persuade the Santa Cruz City Council not to approve the hospitality program, which they compared to a police-state measure designed to sweep the downtown of poor people.

"Why not put up barbed wire around Pacific Mall, search everyone who comes in and check their credit rating?" asked one man.

The host program had been proposed by merchants as a means to address problems including panhandling, graffiti, vandalism, littering and loitering. A half-dozen hosts, clad in polo shirts and khaki shorts and earning \$7.50 an hour, were proposed as a way to reassure the public that downtown is safe, secure and friendly, according to Pat Calvert of the Downtown Association.

At the same time, the hosts were envisioned as "ambassadors to the public," providing directions and information on history and downtown events.

They will operate from the former Delmarette Cafe on Pacific Avenue, next to the Del Mar Theater. While they will have no police authority, they will be trained and supervised by the Santa Cruz Police Department and will attend police roll calls, according to Calvert.

The hospitality program is one of several tactics aimed at changing public perception

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and erasing problems downtown. The council recently approved hiring a county mental-health worker to help substance abusers, troubled youth and the mentally ill. New city ordinances have also been drafted to crack down on loiterers and panhandlers.

The hospitality program has received \$20,000 in start-up funds from the city, and the promise of lease revenue generated by the downtown kiosks. The Downtown Association has kicked in another \$50,000.

The City Council was being asked Tuesday to approve formation of an assessment district which would raise another approximate \$55,000 a year from charges to property owners. Seven of the 89 property owners opposed formation of the district, according to City Clerk Emma Solden, not enough to halt its formation.

"I see it as adding a modicum of civilization downtown," said Joan Levine, owner of Camouflage.

Council members agreed that downtown needed ammunition such as the hospitality program to make it a viable commercial district.

If the downtown fails to thrive, residents will be left only with shopping malls and chain stores, said council member Neal Coonerty, who owns Bookshop Santa Cruz on Pacific Avenue.

"We're going to put laws and ordinances in effect in order to make the commercial district survive," said Coonerty.

The council voted 6-0, with Louis Rittenhouse abstaining, to approve the assessment district.

But first, at the suggestion of Council member Katherine Beiers, the council changed it from a "host" to a "hospitality" program, because "hospitality" is a gender-neutral word.

The program still, however, proved unappealing to the crowd that filled the city council chambers. It was blasted as "fascism," "harassment," a "rent-a-cop program," and "police-state measure."

"This ordinance is apparently ... designed to obstruct certain classes of people," protested David "Won Ton" Jacobs, who called it a "harassment program."

"Where are we to go?" asked John Robinson, who said he was homeless. "Sure, clean the streets up, but provide a place for us to go."

People argued that the drum circles, dancers, singers, storytellers add to the attraction of downtown, and said using hosts to push them out will only detract from the mall.

"I love hanging on the mall," said Linda Edwards, "but I won't feel welcome if this thing passes."