

# Sexual harassment on the mall

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SANTA CRUZ — The gala grand opening of the Pacific Garden Mall 14 years ago marked the end of an era and a dream come true for the late Chuck Abbott and his supporters. They worked hard to change the image of Santa Cruz from a seedy little resort town into a quaint, beautifully-landscaped village with rebuilt Victorian houses.

## Analysis

Abbott's vision, talent and tenacity won him national recognition and the title, "Father of the Pacific Garden Mall."

Today, the mall is still beautiful, still vibrant with floral color all year-round and still an attraction for tourists from around the world.

But there's something unpleasant about the mall today that was not part of Abbott's vision.

Some women who work and walk on the mall are afraid and angry because of verbal sexual harassment.

The City Council this week ordered its Commission on the Prevention of Violence Against Women to address the problem.

The term, sexual harassment, is very broad.

It could mean an annoying, but rather benign incident, such as teenagers yelling obscenities from their car at a woman pedestrian.

Or, the incident could be more frightening:

- A woman followed in the dark by a strange man as she walks down the mall to the bus stop from her place of work.

- An extremely vulgar remark made to a woman's face from a stranger standing in an alcove on the mall.

- A "weirdo" planting himself in a chair at a restaurant and staring at the women employees.

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# Sexual harassment

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The complaints focus on the street wanderers who congregate on the mall and park their sleeping bags, blankets, backpacks and guitar cases outside the doorways of local businesses.

"You don't want to prejudge people by the way they look, but I think a lot of them really enjoy making other people feel uncomfortable, and women, in particular, are vulnerable to that," said one mall restaurant manager.

"They just come in and sit and stare. A lot of them are just weirdos. Maybe they'd never do anything, but how do we know that?"

Those frightening and vulgar incidents worry Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt, who brought the issue to the council's attention this week, and commission Chairwoman Gillian Greensite, who is also director of UCSC's rape prevention program.

Complaints stem from "outrageous comments (to women) that are totally

revolting," said Greensite.

The commission must first discover how widespread is the problem, before discussing solutions, said Greensite.

Some women workers interviewed this week by The Sentinel said there have been "many" incidents. Others said they knew of no incidents.

"I don't think there's a high percentage of incidents," said a clothing store manager. She views the mall street people as colorful, not harmful, "except for the vagrants who sleep in the doorway. They're not very colorful."

But bookstore employee Susan Freeman, who agreed to have her name used in this article, said incidents of sexual harassment make her feel "angry" and "violated."

Freeman also is a programmer for a local radio station, a former Cabrillo College teaching assistant and poetry teacher.

Said Freeman: "I don't think it's possible to judge how people choose to

live, but when they violate my rights, I feel something needs to be done.

"Women have to get together and create a united front — like the 'take back the night' marches."

When a man harasses Freeman, she said, she has a double-pronged reaction: "I get angry that men feel they have a right to treat me in that violent way, plus I recognize they, too, are victims of something a lot bigger than my own anger."

The problem and history of sexual harassment, of course, runs much deeper and longer than the five blocks of the Santa Cruz mall.

Incidents on the mall reflect "deep sexist attitudes that are very widespread," said Greensite.

A short-term solution on the mall might be a leafleting campaign and women's assertiveness training, said Greensite.

The long-term solution, in Greensite's opinion, is an education program to shift attitudes.

The town's been caught in a time

warp since the hippie era of the '60s.

The free love, flower children mentality visited and left other towns 15 years ago. In Santa Cruz, it stayed.

There has been an unwritten code of ethics here dedicated to tolerance and mellowspeak — a code that isn't part of any law book in the nation.

But what was mellow and colorful in the '60s and less so in the '70s has become an albatross around the neck of downtown in the '80s.

Wormhoudt said it's time for the community to take a stand against unacceptable social behavior by street people and others on the mall and in San Lorenzo Park.

"It's a community problem. We have to let people know that we are not going to tolerate this.

"We have to say 'no' to these people. We have to say, 'No. You can't bring 10 cartons of ice cream, that you got from God knows where, down to the mall and eat it with your fingers. You can't do it.

"No. You can't urinate on the

walls. It's disgusting.

"No. You can't make remarks like that to women.

"The mall is sort of like our largest park. The city pays a lot of money to maintain it. It's a beautiful spot.

"Why should we give it up? We should take it back. This is our downtown."

Those interviewed agreed the problem of verbal sexual harassment is a social problem, not a police problem.

"Passing new laws doesn't work (for this kind of a problem.) It never has," said Wormhoudt.

Some people say removing the mall benches would drive away the transients.

Wormhoudt disagrees. "It would be just the rest of us who would suffer. These are the kind of people who would start sitting on the sidewalk if the benches were gone."

Police Chief Jack Bassett said few complaints are filed on verbal sexual harassment.

"Usually the statements are made

by a stranger. By the time the woman can get around to finding a policeman, the stranger is gone," said Chief Bassett.

Also, it is difficult to get a court conviction on such a complaint.

The penal code states it is a misdemeanor if "any person uses offensive words in a public place which are inherently likely to provoke an immediate violent reaction."

The victim would have to show that she was so offended she became violently angry, said Bassett.

Ironically, said Greensite, "a lot of women do not react violently. It is a feeling of powerlessness, an emotional hurt."

Those interviewed agreed police presence helps stem the number of incidents.

But stationing an officer on every corner would not only be an expensive solution, but would give the mall the look of fascism — certainly contradictory to Abbott's dream.