

Eastside merchants flay city traffic plans

By JOHN ROBINSON
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SANTA CRUZ — A traffic revolt is brewing among Eastside business owners who are unhappy about the possibility of losing streetside parking on Soquel Avenue.

Changes to the street may be years away, but already members of the Eastside Business Association are planning to fight proposals to remove street parking to make way for bicycle and traffic lanes.

At an association meeting Monday, merchants said businesses will fail if parking is removed. Rather than removing spaces, some merchants proposed Soquel Avenue should be narrowed to two lanes — traffic flow be damned.

"The Eastside (business district) is losing its identity. More and more, it's just becoming a thoroughfare," said John Schroeder, owner of Eastside Electronics. "Traffic engineers just see the problem as traffic flow. Where do they think all those people are going? Straight to 41st Avenue (to shop). I think we should slow them down."

The merchants were responding to a set of traffic proposals that go before the city Traffic Commission next month for inclusion into the city's General Plan.

Chris Schneider, the city's assistant director of public works, briefed the business group Monday on proposals for the Soquel Avenue corridor. One proposal calls

for the widening of Soquel Avenue to six lanes. Another calls for four traffic lanes, with left turn lanes. Both would probably require bicycle lanes and the elimination of street parking.

The traffic plans are being developed to accommodate traffic demands for the next 15 years, when traffic volume is expected to double on many streets. If traffic service is to remain adequate, changes must be made to main arteries such as Soquel Avenue, Schneider said.

When any changes might be made is uncertain.

Schneider said the city currently is devoting most of its resources to rebuilding downtown Santa Cruz. After that, the next major improvements are slated for Mission and River streets. Soquel Avenue would come later, probably no sooner than five years from now, Schneider said.

"We don't anticipate doing anything right now," he said. "There are also no plans to remove parking for bike lanes, not that that couldn't come up. The council could be petitioned (and changes made sooner)."

The business owners said that parking is vital to the area.

"What would happen to the little businesses that lose proximity parking?" asked Marty Fox, owner of Pic's New and Used Furniture. "Customers would have no place to park and they couldn't patronize

those businesses. ... I would lose half my business."

A number of merchants said they would be forced to close or move locations if parking was removed.

"The real question is just how important is business to the city and the City Council," said Schroeder of Eastside Electronics. "Do they care?"

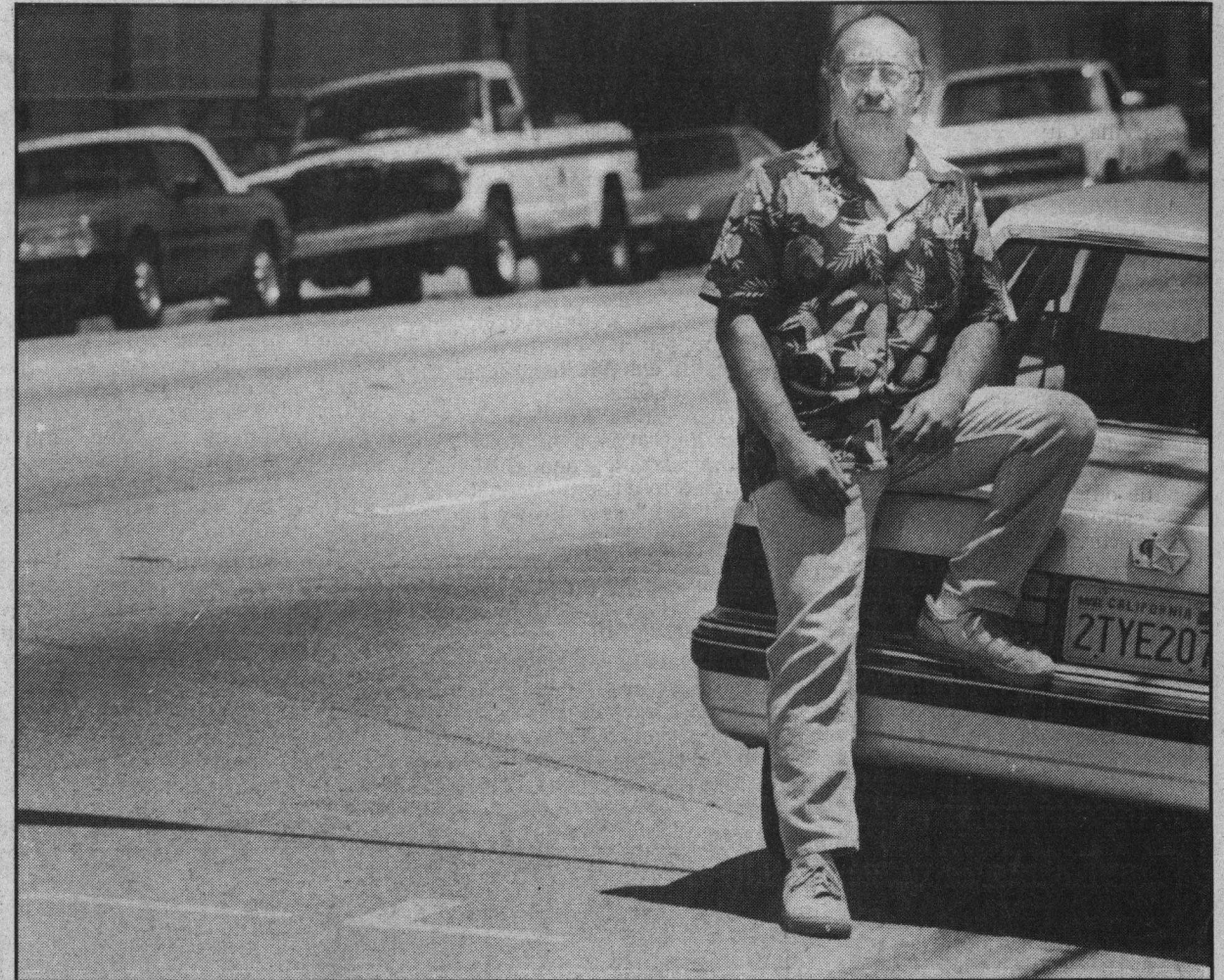
Another asked is it in the city's interest to have scenic bicycle lanes, and speed the flow of traffic at the expense of businesses, which not only serve the community but provide tax revenue. The more quickly traffic moves through the area, the more money is lost to Capitola and other shopping areas, merchants said.

Eastside merchants said they have long felt ignored by the city. Joe Hall, a city planner at the meeting, admitted that the city hadn't done a comprehensive survey of the Eastside businesses and parking for 20 years.

"We don't even know how much square footage of businesses we have there," Hall said.

Hall said it was time the city surveyed the Eastside district. Current city records are so out of date that Hall said he looked at the business permit for one restaurant in the area that he knows employee at least 50 people, but is listed as having only three employees.

"We're afraid we're going to be railroaded," Fox said. "And the small businesses will basically go under."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Soquel Avenue merchant Marty Fox says patrons won't stop if there's no parking.