

*'There is a sense of urgency now because people don't feel comfortable downtown.'*

RYAN COONERTY, SANTA CRUZ CITY COUNCIL

# City vows downtown changes



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A homeless man sleeps at the back of a Pacific Avenue lot in downtown Santa Cruz on Monday. City officials say they want to cut down on behavior problems downtown, some of which have been attributed to the homeless.

## Plan boosts police patrols, reaches out to merchants

By SHANNA McCORD  
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SANTA CRUZ — City leaders, stung with criticism that downtown is plagued by bad behavior and crime, say they will step up efforts to curtail aggressive panhandling, drug dealing and transients who spit on sidewalks and intimidate Pacific Avenue visitors.

"There is a sense of urgency now because people don't feel comfortable downtown," said Councilman Ryan Coonerty, whose family owns Bookshop Santa Cruz on Pacific Avenue. "We have to respond to that."

The city's ramped-up efforts will include increased police patrols, cooperation with merchants and seeking help from state law enforcement.

Downtown is no stranger to crime. The area has seen its share of vandalism, burglaries and drug sales, though city officials have taken measures during the past decade to revitalize the area and have been successful in cracking down on illegal activity.

Still, police say, downtown

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PAGE A10

in general sees more crime than other parts of the city, and is known as a homeless hangout because of its proximity to County Jail, the Metro bus station, the San Lorenzo River levee, a needle-exchange program on Front Street and the Homeless Services Center in the Harvey West neighborhood. Crime statistics weren't available for arrests that have taken place downtown during the past few months, but Police Chief Howard Skerry said "illegal activity is consistently high there."

Downtown resident Mike Bethke, who oversees a construction project on Pacific Avenue, said Monday, "I see a lot more aggressive behav-

See DOWNTOWN on PAGE A12



Shaminder Dulai/Sentinel

A homeless person's belongings sit in a pile next to a trash can on Pacific Avenue on Monday afternoon. City leaders say they want to clean up downtown.

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## Downtown

Continued from Page A1

ior and people are sleeping all over the place. My wife won't go out at night."

Coonerty, responding to letters and complaints from residents who say downtown problems have reached a new low, teamed with council colleagues Lynn Robinson and Cynthia Mathews to tackle the issue.

Their plan includes:

■ Overtime pay for police to increase

patrols.

■ Coordinating enforcement with state parole and probation officers.

■ Enforcing a new parking garage loitering law that forces people to leave garages within 15 minutes.

■ Speeding up replacement of burned-out street lights.

■ Hiring a new police community-service officer designated for downtown.

■ Reaching out to downtown merchants and employees.

■ Increasing communication with the District Attorney's Office.

A staffing shortage in the Police

Department, including the retirement of a downtown community service officer in August, could be contributing to a spike in crime and other obnoxious behavior, Skerry said. Police say they are recruiting for a replacement.

Robinson, a landscape designer who works downtown at least four days a week, said she has seen loitering and aggressive panhandling become "a little out of balance" recently. The severity, she said, depends on the time of day.

"We have to make downtown a place you feel safe and you know you're safe," Robinson said. "I'm really interested in

reaching out to the merchants and talking with them about what they can do to help with this issue."

Despite the problems, downtown remains a popular place for people to shop, socialize and work. Vacancy for downtown office and retail space currently stands at 4 percent.

"Ninety-five percent of the time downtown is a fantastic place," Coonerty said. "We have to work on that 5 percent to make people feel comfortable."

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