

Merchant sponsors give an ultimatum on Farmers Market

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Downtown Association directors handed the City Council a tough decision Tuesday when they formally requested that the Farmers Market be moved to Sunday or face finding a new sponsor.

"Downtown has grown to a point where (the market) is not a Wednesday fit anymore," said John Craver, president of the association, which has sponsored the market for more than five years.

The farmers, however, have rejected a move to Sunday, and they plan to ask the city to make them the sponsors and keep the market on Wednesday.

"The market has been on Wednesday since its inception," said spokesman Joe Curry of Molino Creek Farm in Davenport. "It's become pretty much a fixture here for

our customers and for us."

The clash over the movable feast of vegetables will come to a head next Tuesday afternoon when the council decides which events-permit request to honor.

Although the who and when may be in doubt, council members have been adamant that there is no chance the market will close.

When a rumor spread like weeds last month that the market's demise was imminent, City Hall was deluged with calls and letters from worried or angry citizens lobbying for the weekly organically grown food festival to continue.

"I'm not willing to swim up that stream," said Mayor Mike Rotkin, who fielded many of the telephone calls. "It's what the citizens want."

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Farmers Market

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Rotkin and council members Scott Kennedy and Katherine Beiers have been meeting with farmers and Downtown Association members for more than a month, trying to find a site that would please everyone.

The hunt was precipitated by the association's concern that some of its merchant members were being financially damaged by the Wednesday market, which routinely draws transients accused of stealing, littering and generally causing problems.

"It's not fair to sacrifice a few businesses for the Farmers Market," said John Lisher, vice president of the Downtown Association. "It's like saying, 'We're really sorry we have to slaughter you on the altar, but we're doing it for the good of everybody else.'"

Because the task force was unable to find an acceptable site elsewhere in the downtown, association leaders decided that the next best thing would be to conduct the market on Sunday morning.

Craver pointed out that many merchants aren't open at that time, parking would not be a problem and more people might be able to shop because it would be on a non-work day.

"Everybody likes the Farmers Market ... and downtown is a real appropriate place for it — at a time when it doesn't impact businesses," said Craver.

But farmer Curry pointed out that many vendors already have committed to other markets on

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*— John Lisher,
Downtown Association*

weekends, and didn't want to give up the coveted midweek opportunity to reach a loyal, hungry crowd.

Curry said the farmers already are working on bylaws for a new organization formed to sponsor the market. It would have a board of directors to deal not only with routine items surrounding the 40-vendor market, but also the broader social and management issues that have frustrated the Downtown Association.

Kennedy said he hopes the council will have a third option on Tuesday: approve both a Wednesday and a Sunday market.

"I think that there's certainly enough support to have a second market on the weekend," said Kennedy. "The farmers are not enthusiastic about it because many of them already do markets on Sunday. We've got the cream of the crop on Wednesdays."

The farmers aren't the only ones who are cool to Kennedy's idea.

"We would not consider it because it doesn't do anything to solve the problem," said Craver of the Downtown Association. "There are merchants downtown who really have had their sales affected by the Farmers Market on Wednesdays."

Both Kennedy and Rotkin said if they have to choose only one day, they will go with the farmers on Wednesdays.

"I wouldn't force the farmers to switch from Wednesday to Sunday," said Kennedy. "The farmers have a good point. They've developed a clientele. They can't just say, 'Oh, by the way, we've changed days.'"

The Downtown Association stands to lose the nearly \$25,000 it collects yearly by sponsoring the market. But officials said a merchant-advocacy organization must support its members.

The situation, said Craver, "really put us on the defensive in every way imaginable."

"The growers were upset because they thought we were trying to chase them out of downtown," he said. "The shoppers were angry because they thought we were blaming them for the vandalism and crime. The business owners were angry because they thought we weren't sensitive to their plight."

"No matter what we did, we couldn't make everyone happy."