

Pacific Ave

City, merchants plan safer avenue

Downtown improvements discussed

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SANTA CRUZ — Solutions are in the works to improve the downtown shopping district, plagued by a New Year's Eve riot and a two-week homeless peace vigil in the past month.

At a meeting Thursday, merchants, police and city officials discussed plans for:

- A county social worker to spend 40 hours a week on Pacific Avenue helping substance abusers, troubled youth and the mentally ill;
- A team of "downtown hosts" to meet and greet shoppers while maintaining security and helping police;



Bassett



Kennedy

- New city ordinances to crack down on loiterers and panhandlers;
- An organized 1994 New Year's Eve celebration called "First Night";
- Renewing the Santa Cruz

Cares program that enables shoppers to buy vouchers for food, transportation and shelter for panhandlers.

Recruitment is under way for the social worker, and a lease is being negotiated to house the host program at the old Delmarette cafe, said Redevelopment Agency director Ceil Cirillo. Kennedy said the ordinance should come before the council later this year.

"There's a new commitment to the downtown from the Santa Cruz City Council," Mayor Scott Kennedy told the merchants. "You're going to be getting more attention, and seeing the fruition of a lot of work."

Please see SAFER — BACK PAGE

Safer downtown planned

Continued from Page A1

Merchants said they had a good holiday shopping season downtown, where \$20 million of earthquake rehabilitation and improvements were recently completed. But they said sales would have been better without panhandling and other problems.

Judi Wyant, who owns a downtown antique store, said two burglaries and shattered windows in the riot have left her feeling "really violated."

"I feel really, really vulnerable," she said.

Police Chief Jack Bassett said the riot on New Year's Eve, which left about 20 stores with broken windows and five police officers with injuries, caught everyone by surprise. He said his department was greatly outnumbered.

"I'm very, very sorry for what

took place down there," he said. "It was beyond our wildest imagination what went on down there. I can assure you next year things will be different."

Kennedy said that at its Tuesday meeting, the council will discuss a proposal from Santa Cruz residents Trink and Robert Bickal to hold an organized "First Night" New Year's Eve celebration next year.

In addition to speaking about the riot at the meeting, Kennedy issued a media release Thursday praising the police for their response and deploring the violence.

"It marred the beginning of the New Year and tarnished Santa Cruz's image at a time when the city is struggling to revitalize our downtown," the release said.

During the meeting, Kennedy and Councilman Neal Coonerty also said the Sentinel has been irre-

sponsible in its reporting of problems on Pacific Avenue.

"Their attitude about downtown stinks," said Coonerty.

Sergio Formiga, 19, of Santa Cruz, faces three felony counts of assault on peace officer in connection with the rioting. He pleaded not guilty to the charges Tuesday, according to Assistant District Attorney Gary Brayton. Formiga's \$5,000 bail was dropped, and he was released from custody on his own recognizance.

Police are continuing their search for those responsible for vandalism that cost downtown merchants an estimated \$30,000.

Investigators are sifting through photographs and videos taken by spectators to identify the culprits, Bassett said.

Staff writer May Wong contributed to this report.