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What's Good And Bad About The Mall?

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Virtually all the world loves the Pacific Avenue Mall but there's less unanimity on the subjects of what's good or bad about the mall and what should be done to make the mall an even stronger bastion of commercial and cultural activities.

A panel discussion on the past, present and future of the mall at the Holiday Inn Thursday brought out more than 100 residents and business people to lend their thinking to efforts to attract ever-increasing numbers of shoppers to the city's commercial center.

The meeting was sponsored by the Santa Cruz Downtown Association. The panelists were Max Walden, developer of Cooperhouse, Dr. Richard Ratcliff, professor emeritus of economics, and Samuel Leask III, managing partner of Leask's. Moderator was Manny Shaffer, geography lecturer and community planner for UCSC, executive of PROD and owner of the ID building on the mall.

Hostess Judy Sadlier, resident manager of Dean Witter-Reynolds, got a big response to her early urgings: "We want you to speak, to give us your ideas for fresh approaches that will cut through a lot of hackneyed beliefs."

Leask detailed the development of the mall, which he said began back in 1951 when the city council of that time put in parking meters along Walnut Avenue and put the revenues therefrom into the general fund. This led to merchant action to create the parking district to provide free spaces for downtown visitors. Then, later, came area upgrading, including the mall.

Leask said the area is now faced by competition from 41st

Avenue but that the downtown can handle it if more parking and public amenities are provided and if the businesspeople keep their noses to the grindstone.

Walden said that when he came to town from Los Gatos to buy the courthouse for \$75,000 to convert into the present Cooperhouse, there were 18 vacancies down along the mall and about 100 on the second floors. He said the other day he was offered \$1.5 million for Cooperhouse "so we must be doing something right."

But Walden blasted the involvement of the business community in developing parking lots, saying that is the business of the city. He blasted the tickets people can get for parking longer than two hours, the inclean streets, failure to maintain plantings fully. Walden said the business community is running physical facilities for the public that should be run by the city and that the business people get blamed for the bad things. He said the business people should get out of the job of doing things the city should be doing and he said the city is doing a lousy job of operating the mall.

Walden also figuratively cocked his snook at the press for reporting the police reports on behavioral problems along the mall and he asserted there is no crime problem on the mall.

Ratcliff called for a diagnosis of problems that may beset the mall, saying that only after that is done can a plan of action be taken. He noted that the median age in the area is now 29, compared with 44 in 1960, that the number of seniors 65 or over is declining, that there are fewer children, that the 20 to 34 age group in seven years has jumped from 20 percent of the population to 35 percent.

Adaptability of downtown merchandising and services to

changing markets and the competition appear necessary, Ratcliff said. More housing may be necessary, a "close-in conference and performing arts center.

"We need to start now before things deteriorate," Ratcliff said. "I don't think the downtown has been seriously hurt by 41st Avenue, but it may be."

Many attendees spoke during the question and answer period. The majority deplored recent publicity about the police report on behavioral problems, and one businessman urged a campaign be led by the press to detail the good things about the mall.

A new businessman from Monterey said the local downtown merchants have in the mall something much better than they realize, that many in Monterey would love to have it instead of the conference center there.

Others urged that people not be hassled because they have long hair or play music on the streets. Others urged more promotions, more advertising out of the area, an extension of the mall to the beach area.

The consensus seemed to be that yes, the mall may have problems, but that they're not nearly as bad as some people say.

And to demonstrate the mall has a lot of things the people want, Walden picked business people at random and asked how they had fared economically in the last half of 1977. One reported a 40 percent increase, another reported a 30 to 35 percent increase, and Walden reported a 20 percent increase for Cooperhouse.

Sadlier indicated all the suggestions will be considered in efforts by the Downtown Association to make the mall even better in the years ahead.