

SC chamber gets interim director

By JONDI GUMZ

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SANTA CRUZ — A woman who has spent the past four years trying to get businesses involved in education has been named interim executive director of the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce.

Melissa McClaren-Lighty, a 16-year resident of Santa Cruz and formerly executive director of the Industry Education Council, started work Monday with departing chief executive officer Dan Ehrler. He announced last month that he would leave April 28 to head up a larger chamber in Santa Monica.

McClaren-Lighty wasn't available for comment Thursday. Chamber president Michael Sarka said she was attending a chamber meeting in Sacramento.

The Santa Cruz business organization has 860 members and a \$300,000 annual budget.

Chosen Chamber board member of the year in 1994, McClaren-Lighty has resigned from the board while she is interim director, Sarka said. He declined to disclose her salary, but said "for our size, we're in the median."

The interim post, he emphasized, is a full-time job. While the trend today is to try to do more with less, "we can't. We have to keep it going at full steam," Sarka said.

One of the first projects for McClaren-Lighty is next Wednesday's business fair at the Cocoanut Grove.

Beyond that, Sarka expects her to look at the Chamber's regular monthly programs, such as "Good Morning Santa Cruz," the luncheons for women in business, and the "Business After Hours" mixers, to see how to increase participation.

Chamber members are expected to meet Monday to finalize a job description for a permanent chief executive, Sarka said. It will be several months before a new CEO is on board, he predicted.

McClaren-Lighty is interested in the job, Sarka said. "She is not excluded as a candidate for the permanent position," he said.

Sarka said the Chamber was "fortunate an executive of Melissa's caliber and expertise is available to us."

Among the programs run by the Industry Education Council are "Adopt a School," which involves more than 50 partnerships between schools and businesses, and "Principal for a Day," which brings business leaders into classrooms.

A member of the Santa Cruz Coalition for Work Force Preparation, McClaren-Lighty helped launch Cities in School, a program to give high school dropouts a second chance, helping write a report on the feasibility of the idea, and drafting an initial application for a foundation grant.

As chairman of the Chamber's education committee last year, she developed a pilot program called "Your Future is our Business," writing curriculum to teach students at Mission Hill Junior High what's necessary for them to be successful in the business world.

Bill Marshak, a Chamber member who is co-chairman of that committee this year, said McClaren-Lighty has "good organizational skills" and is "a delightful person to be around."

A mother of two, McClaren-Lighty previously served as a loaned expert on local government energy planning to the President's Energy Clearinghouse, represented the National Association of Counties as a speaker, and trained at the Iacocca Partnerships Institute at Lehigh University.