

Ambitious goals suggested to revitalize downtown

By DONALD MILLER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The plan to revitalize Santa Cruz's downtown has begun to take shape.

The drive to change and improve the nearly two-decade-old Pacific Garden Mall has been moving earnestly forward in recent months, and the void was given at least some sort of form Wednesday after a meeting of city officials and business leaders.

The meeting at Loudon Nelson Community Center was attended by almost 50 people, including three city council members and

members of the city's Downtown Commission and Downtown Association of businesses.

Almost everyone had an idea or two on how to improve the city's economic showplace.

Some of the rejected or deferred ideas ranged from the slightly bizarre — to turn it into a Disneyland-style arcade with a central theme or themes — to the practical — more public restrooms — to the politically radical, at least in Santa Cruz — to "privatize" the Mall by turning over its maintenance and security to the private sector.

And the Mall's most visible problems, undesirable people doing un-

desirable activities, were not taken up at the meeting. These problems, called "social issues" by the group, were deferred another group of other city officials and representatives of law enforcement, social and health-service agencies and the business community.

The Wednesday morning group concerned itself with issues such as landscaping, traffic circulation, signs and management.

A steering committee was formed to examine and discuss a long list of goals for the future Mall.

Some of these:

- That the Mall and surrounding business district need some kind of centralized management; that such management would recruit businesses, work toward a better retail mix of businesses and work with local government on maintenance and security. Such central management, analogous to the private companies that run suburban shopping malls, would also work on unified promotions and marketing.

- Businesses on the Mall should be open common hours and at least some nights.

- Downtown needs more parking.

- Pedestrian traffic can be better handled; sidewalks can be re-designed, with obstructing planter

boxes removed.

- Signs need to be placed near the freeway, directing tourists and shoppers to the downtown area. Other signs could be placed in parking lots, with maps identifying downtown shops.

- Dead and dying trees need to be removed; healthy trees and shrubbery need to be trimmed and pruned.

- The planning process for businesses wishing to locate downtown needs to be streamlined.

- Second floors of Mall and downtown buildings should be used.

- Downtown should be connected, physically and promotionally, to the beach and wharf area.

- A farmer's market needs to be considered.

- Downtown needs a performing-arts center.

- Street lighting should be improved by the city; businesses should do a better job of lighting store windows and buildings' exteriors.

- The Mall needs an information booth.

- An enclosed area for exhibitions.

- And, a plan to pay for all or any of these changes has to be created. While the list of goals was broad-

ranged, the mood of the meeting was not: there was near-unanimous consent that the Mall needs some major improvements to take it into the next century and to compete with other shopping districts, such as the Capitola Mall and Valley Fair in San Jose.

Vice-mayor Mardi Wormhoudt agreed with business representatives that the "main function" of the Mall and downtown is a "healthy retail environment."

Downtown property owner Louie Rittenhouse Jr. earlier had described the Mall as overgrown with bushes and trees and of having ended up as a "park — with business a second priority."

Rittenhouse said that the city needs a "complete consensus — this is a business district." He called for an "incredible commitment from the city" before property owners would be willing to invest in revitalization efforts.

Wormhoudt, in turn, noted that the city has budgeted \$439,000 this year for downtown maintenance and security.

She praised the "serendipity" of the Mall — its unique blend, she said, of offbeat and more mainstream businesses.

But one merchant, Ed Klein,

warned that shoppers "don't have confidence the Mall is a good place to shop," and suggested the group issue a "joint communiqué" that the city and private business "will do what it takes to keep downtown free of drugs, free of inebriates, free of aggressive panhandling."

Klein's suggestion was passed on to the "social issues" group, which met Wednesday afternoon at the Santa Cruz Library.

This group recently was organized by Mayor John Laird, with the goal, said Laird, of having an economically healthy downtown free of illegal activities.

In addition to some of the immediate issues of what to do with street people, the mentally ill, the homeless-by-choice and the homeless-by-circumstance, Laird's group was looking Wednesday at the issue of a daytime shelter.

Police Chief Jack Bassett repeated his opposition to such a facility, except for the mentally ill, while others debated whether a daytime shelter would alleviate some of the social problems on the Mall.

The city's homeless shelter, located several blocks from the Mall across Highway 1 on River Street, is currently open only at night.