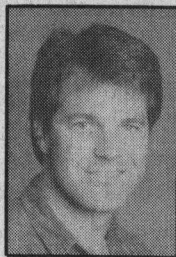


Landlord pulls plug on downtown arcade

By ^{BUS-8} ROBIN MUSITELLI
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Party Zone owner West Walker: 'Nobody wanted me here.'

SANTA CRUZ — Turn out the lights, the party's over.

The Party Zone video arcade is about to go out of business.

This time, it's the landlord who says the kids and controversy were too much and refused to renew the shop's lease.

"I really felt that the neighborhood was starting to change, not for the good," said property owner Gary Schwaezlein. "Other businesses and I felt the area was getting bad. The Party Zone attracted the wrong type of clientele."

Opened five years ago on the south end of Pacific Avenue by West Walker, a onetime male stripper who ran for state Assembly in 1990, the Party Zone originally was an entertainment and party shop. People could hire exotic dancers,

singing telegrams or buy balloon arrangements.

The video games were an afterthought, said Walker, who noticed the number of kids piling off buses at the Metro across the street.

Walker now has 24 video games and a slot car raceway that make up the majority of his business — and his problems.

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Party Zone arcade

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When school lets out, buses from around the county all but deliver business to Walker's doorstep.

Within minutes of opening his doors Tuesday afternoon, a dozen young players lined the shop, each intently focused on the screen in front of him.

But Walker has never been welcomed by his neighbors. Other merchants have complained that Walker's business attracts youths who loiter, litter and vandalize,

hang out in doorways and on the sidewalks.

"From the get-go, nobody wanted me here," he said. "I guess I just breed controversy."

Schwaezlein said nearby businesses, the Blue Lagoon bar next door, and Bugaboo Mountain Sports upstairs, complained about their neighbor.

In 1989, the arcade business was opposed by the city Zoning Board and the Downtown Association, although 33 merchants did support it.

Walker eventually won city approvals to operate, but has since filed suit against the city over its amusement tax. That litigation is pending.

Walker maintains that his business is misunderstood and that the positive attributes of his shop have been ignored by those who stereo-

type and discriminate against youth.

"People see kids hanging around and they think, well, it's because of the place next door," he said.

Walker likens the Party Zone to running a non-profit youth club that has kept kids off the streets by providing them with a place to go and something to do.

The troublemakers on Pacific Avenue aren't his customers, but rather a small group of "skater kids," said Walker. "They're the ones who have done this place in," he said of the south Pacific Avenue area.

It was his willingness to confront troublemakers, call police and press charges that frequently put the Party Zone on the police blotter, according to Walker.

According to Walker, he was about to sell his business and go to

law school when his landlord decided against keeping the arcade at the location.

He fought the eviction in court, but lost last week when the judge invalidated his lease's option to renew. Now, instead of filing applications for law school, Walker said he will file for bankruptcy.

On Tuesday afternoon, Walker spray painted his windows: "Lost lease. Bye."

To Eco Willson, 18, of Scotts Valley, that was not good news. A joy stick in his hand and a copy of "God's Word" at his feet, Willson contemplated the end of his visits to the Party Zone where he has come several times a week since 1989. During that time, he said he's seen fights "all over the mall, but not here."

"Everybody just wants to blame everything on kids," he said.