

✓ DOWNTOWN Officials say Mall cleanup not aimed at street people

SANTA CRUZ — First it was overgrown shrubbery that was removed; then some electrical boxes; finally, the city pulled out the the benches outside Leask's Department Store on the Pacific Garden Mall.

An effort to drive away the street people have congregated outside Leask's?

No, say city officials.

Parks and Recreation Director Jim Lang said the benches were removed for routine maintenance. They will be back, he said, although a date has not been set for their return.

City crews had already removed three honeysuckle vines from the dark alcove in front of Leask's, and took out several electrical boxes from the redwood trellises near the corner of Pacific Avenue and Church Street.

The Parks Department plans to plant flowers in the planter boxes in the alcove.

City Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt said removing the benches was part of the overall spruce-up of the area outside Leask's. Wormhoudt also said that no date has been set for the benches to be re-installed.

The Leask's sidewalk cleanup came on the heels of worries from some in the city's business community that Leask's might leave the mall. Leask's is scheduled to open a new store in the enlarged Capitola Mall in the spring, although store officials have said they have no immediate plans to leave downtown Santa Cruz.

The maintenance effort by the city, if not directed at street people, seems to at least have caused them to gather elsewhere for the time being. Wednesday, the customary clusters of young men and women in tie-dyed clothes were absent from the alcove in front of Leask's.

Some street people have complained they are systematically being driven out of downtown, citing police crackdowns on drug dealing in SCOPE Park across from the mall's north end and increased police presence on the mall after a recent machete attack by a allegedly mentally disturbed man.