

Farmers Market heats up



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Janet Blaser, manager of the Santa Cruz Farmers Market, asked for and received a security escort. Smitty, background, joined Blaser at the market recently following some heated arguments with upset patrons.

Manager gets a bodyguard as tensions run high

By **MARINA MALIKOFF**
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Tensions at the downtown Farmers Market are running so hot that manager Janet Blaser has hired a beefy bodyguard named Smitty to protect her.

SANTA CRUZ The simmering conflict about bongo players and their dancing and chanting followers, who are accused of disrupting the market, came to a head two weeks ago when police cited at least two drummers for disturbing the peace.

Blaser, who signed the complaints, said she has become a target for activists and others who claim the new management policies — namely tighter noise control and fenced areas where people used to gather — are designed to keep musicians, hippies and others with a taste for an alternative lifestyle out of the market.

Blaser said the drumming crowd of two weeks ago grew to 150 people, who were blocking the adjacent parking lot and refused to leave. One “gatherer” threatened her, she said.

“He was in my face yelling,” said Blaser, who was flanked at last Wednesday’s Farmers Market by Smitty and a uniformed Santa Cruz police officer.

Activist Robert Norse has stepped into the flap, setting up a table near one of the market entrances urging residents to support the drumming crowd, which some market patrons consider an attraction. Norse was arrested and cited for trespassing last Wednesday when he began circulating a petition inside the market.

“We want to restore a friendly Farmers Market so that folks of all shapes, sizes and occupations can enjoy the space,” Norse said before the arrest. “It looks like this is

an attempt to exclude a particular group of people.”

Blaser maintains the incessant drumbeats and crowd size drive business away, and that the new policies have vendor support.

“This is the farmers’ livelihood, not a festival,” Blaser said. “Have those 40 drummers set up in your office, your store, your clinic or your parking lot and see how you feel about it.”

Vendor Heidi Herrmann of Swanton Berry Farms said tighter enforcement of the city’s noise ordinances along Pacific Avenue has forced the drummers closer to the Farmers Market.

“We’ve got enough on our plate,” Herrmann said. “It seems like everyone is passing the hot potato.”

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