

Strong comeback for the downtown

By MARTHA MENDOZA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Street musicians, bustling shops and newly laid asphalt greeted thousands of shoppers who returned to downtown Santa Cruz Friday to enjoy Pacific Avenue's recovery.

More than 100 shoppers were bumping elbows at the Bookshop Santa Cruz, where Mayor Neal Coonerty was manning the cash register.

"It's good," he gasped, laughing as he tried to keep up with the customers. "It's better than we expected."

Coonerty, a co-owner of the book store, said a lot of the people walking through his doors had come just to see how the area is looking these days.

"I think people are interested in seeing downtown now and all the new shops," he said.

Construction crews worked late Wednesday to

Please see DOWNTOWN — A2

Downtown scene

Continued from Page A1

meet their deadline and get all 10 blocks of Pacific Avenue open to traffic.

The street, and surrounding buildings, were severely damaged in the 1989 earthquake and underwent a major rebuilding effort this year.

In 1989, shoppers and community members flocked to the downtown stores, many of which had relocated into temporary pavilions, in a show of support.

But for the past two years, the combined effects of the recession and the major renovations going on in downtown kept many customers away.

John Lisher, the former Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce president, said Friday it was too early to be sure, but that it looked like this may be the year the shoppers return en masse to downtown.

Dina Ruff, and her daughter Deborah, said they came downtown Friday to see the new stores, help the struggling merchants, and plan their holiday shopping.

Ruff, who lives in Aptos, said she has visited downtown several times since the earthquake and that Friday it was "looking good."

"It's not as depressing," she said. "You're finally seeing a lot of people here, which is wonderful."

Shoppers Stacey and Carol Easterbrooks said they avoided the Capitola Mall because they were looking

for interesting stores.

"A mall is a mall," said Carol Easterbrooks, who had come from Oregon to visit daughter Stacey.

"I like the shops down here better," added Stacey Easterbrooks. "Plus, there's a million people at the mall today."

Challenging downtown shoppers for sidewalk space were the television crews and news reporters, who turned out to see if the revitalized street would bring back the pre-earthquake crowds: "busiest shopping day of the year."

As they strolled past construction sites, Lisher hustled hand-made crafty items in his Artisans store and chatted about downtown's recovery.

"We knew that when the street was opened, people would pour in, and they are," he said, as another customer walked into his shop.

Lisher said he wasn't disappointed that some of the work is not complete — street furniture must be installed, gardens need to be planted, kiosks have yet to

be erected and about a dozen gaping holes that were once busy stores still dot the street.

But Lisher said he was just thrilled to see what is there — the street has been paved, the trees are planted and the outdoor lights have been installed.

"We're pretty easy to please these days," he said. "Indoor plumbing excites us."

Lisher said Friday he had already seen many customers who hadn't visited the area for the past few years.

"We've had a lot of people downtown who hadn't been here since the earthquake," Lisher said.

One of downtown's hottest spots Friday was the comic book store Atlantis Fantasyworld, where crowds were lined up at 10 a.m. to buy the first edition Superman memorial comic books.

"It's been wonderful, it's been chaotic, people were flooding in and they went right for the Supermans," owner Joe Ferrara said.

Friday was Atlantis' first day of business in its new

home in the Locust Street garage. It was also the store's 16th anniversary, and Ferrara was glowing as he watched customers enjoy his new location.

In 1976, he opened on the day after Thanksgiving in a store on Pacific Avenue. Thirteen years later, on Oct. 17, 1989, his store was destroyed by the Loma Prieta earthquake. On the day after Thanksgiving of that year, he reopened in a pavilion erected for displaced downtown merchants.

Friday, after three years in a tent, Ferrara said it was his "lucky day."

As shoppers returned to downtown Santa Cruz, homeless people got back to work soliciting money, and street musicians entertained the crowds.

One homeless man, who held a sign which says he has AIDS and needs help, said the crowds had raised his hopes. He asked that his name not be used.

"There's more people out here, so there's probably going to be more money, God willing," he said.