'Upscale' downtown envisioned

Pacific Garden Mall
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SANTA CRUZ — A rebuilt downtown Santa Cruz will be attractive to upscale retailers, a consultant consultant hired by the city told members of the Downtown Association's Property Owners Committee on Wednesday.

That upscale sales niche, said Robert Sprague, is now primarily filled by shops in the San Jose area.

Using The Gap and Gottschalks as a benchmark, Sprague said he sees a market for stores of that caliber — and above. "I spent a day at the Capitola Mall and I came away encouraged," said Sprague, who has been hired by the city to develop a retail recruitment plan as part of the downtown recovery process.

"It (Capitola Mall) is very middle-of-the road, middle-American retailing," he explained. He said that mall is "neat and clean and is doing a very good job for that market."

Sprague said the rest of 41st Avenue "is a good place to buy tile, a wedding gown or tuxedo and to get fast food."

Neither, he said, should be a competitor for downtown Santa Cruz.

"I'm convinced there is a great deal of above-middle apparel and accessories (business) that's going just 33 miles away (in San Jose)," he sai[illegible] the

Sprague of Durham, N.H. said he could [illegible] the names of stores that might be interested, but said a number have been negotiating for space downtown.

His talk seemed to pep up the owners. "I am really

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excited about the vision I'm hearing today," said George Protsman, owner of Poor Richard's Almanac.

"I can see that we have an opportunity to do more than just rebuild," he said.

The heart and soul of local retailing, Sprague said, should continue to be locally-owned specialty shops and restaurants.

"Why did Cat 'n Canary do better last weekend than other stores on the Capitola Mall or in San Jose? Because that store is unique and special. It's organic," Sprague said.

Sprague said a department store would help the retail mix downtown, but that it is not critical to the success of rebuilding.

"Nationally, regional department stores are becoming less important and specialty stores are becoming more important," said Sprague, who has advised more than 800 cities. In Kalamazoo, Mich. he was dubbed the "retail doctor."

Sprague is working with the Roma Design Group of San Francisco, which has been hired to draft the overall downtown-recovery plan.

In doing so, Roma will be working with a third group of consultants, who have been hired to plan the streetscape.

Jim Adams of Roma said upper floors of new buildings are well-suited to office uses. In fact, he said, the city should discourage large office developments elsewhere until downtown is built up.

Housing also is appropriate, he said, but it should not be made mandatory for property owners who already will be burdened by higher costs.

When Adams asked property owners if they had questions, one man shouted "What about the bums?"

Adams said that concern had been raised many times in meetings with owners and merchants in the past week.

"The problem with the old mall was that some areas really impeded pedestrian movement and allowed transients to take them over as their territory," Adams said.

Opening up the mall will help, he said. Encouraging outdoor cafes, too, would help convert Pacific Avenue to appropriate uses, he said.

Adams said his company planned the redesign of the Third Street Mall in Santa Monica, where transients have been replaced by theater-goers, diners and shoppers. "That made it less attractive to the transients, who previously dominated the street," Adams said.