

Street ^{City of Santa Cruz} people are MIA

By GREG BEEBE
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SANTA CRUZ — Missing from the post-earthquake Pacific Avenue Mall: shoppers, browsers, diners, tourists, merchants, businessmen. And the so-called street people.

The 7.1-magnitude question is, whatever became of the pre-earthquake people of the street, a congregation of homeless, drunks, panhandlers, runaways, free-thinkers and the mentally ill?

The answer is, they're still out there.

"See that fence? It keeps them off the mall," said attorney Ray Grueneich. From his downtown office, Grueneich staunchly defends the rights of street people.

Before the Oct. 17 quake, the mall teemed with the colorful trappings of Santa Cruz counterculture: tie-dye, tribal drums, political petitions, minstrels, proselytizers, dropouts. To detractors, the mall was a good place to be panhandled, offended or sexually harassed.

Now the mall is fenced off from the outside world, a mere shell of its former exotic self.

When the mall comes back, so will the street people. And so will the downtown's social problem and renewed efforts to "clean up" the mall.

"They will all be there," said Judith Beinert, a "humanist" involved in a variety of causes supporting the homeless.

"If they're not allowed, there's going to be a fight for it. I'm sure of that, and so are the street people.

"They (the powers that be) can make it uncomfortable but they can't make it off-limits," Beinert said. "If they tried, those of us with money would find a place there for them."

Beinert said many downtown regulars have retreated to "places where they used to go when they weren't on the mall, that I wouldn't tell you about — they're private."

"I still see them around," said Robert Norse, backer of causes aiding the homeless. "They come to the meals. Some go to the satellite shelters. Some are camping in the hills. I haven't noticed an exodus.

"The mall is a gathering place, a place to hang out. I suspect what the city is going to do is use this whole thing to do a 'super renovation' of the mall," Norse said.

"They want people with middle-class orientations, or at least that have money in their pockets."

"It's the center of town," Norse said. "Some people on the mall are selling psychedelics and marijuana. The police, of course, have filled the jail with these people."

Longstanding law-enforcement problems on the mall have largely disappeared "because the mall is not there," said Santa Cruz Police Lt. Rick Bartle.

"Which is not to say we're not having problems on the outskirts, but it's not as prevalent as it has been," Bartle said.

Andy Morin of the Interfaith Satellite Shelter program deals with dozens of homeless and mall denizens daily. From his vantage point, the social makeup of the mall is not going to change.

"I think that things are not going to change that much. Those people who don't have work and stuff are going to be returning ... I think that the mall tended to concentrate people. Now, they're more diffused," Morin said.

If anything, Morin said, the number of homeless on the mall may increase as the year comes to a close. "We expect by mid-December to have above the numbers of homeless we had last month" as hotel vouchers for displaced quake victims expire, Morin said.

Some downtown merchants have long expressed a desire to make the mall a less hospitable place for street people, but Morin has his doubts.

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"I think it's been the stance of the city to make sure there are services for homeless people, while at the same time protecting the security and safety of the downtown," Laird said. "I think that's what we'll really work for in planning for the rebuilding."

"Certainly the mall is going to be different when it's all back in place," said Councilwoman Katherine Beiers. "I would hope nobody is displaced by that ... We want to revitalize the mall so that there's room for everybody, so that everybody feels comfortable. I'm convinced that it all can happen," Beiers said.

"The quake is a golden opportunity for the homeless and anti-homeless," Grueneich said. "It's a real watershed."

Renovating the mall in the aftermath of the Oct. 17 earthquake is an opportunity for foes of street people to create a "*cordone sanitaire*," Grueneich said. "To somehow make it an area just for the profitable and culturally sanitized ...

"Having a culturally enriched community is invit-

ing to those persons who are seen as social problems. What's going to happen — if that sanitary approach is taken — is that there will not only be hardships for those who are stigmatized, but there will be another loss that the middle class will surely regret.

"The ability of small business to survive goes hand in hand with this being an open, tolerant community," Grueneich said.

"I'd rather not characterize it as a street people problem," said Tom Breznsy, a former downtown business owner and executive director of the Santa Cruz County Restaurant Association.

"It's social issues, a combination of a lot of issues. Those who are homeless by choice, drug issues, public inebriacy.

"In terms of whether it had improved before the quake, my perception as an individual was, no, it didn't. I didn't see a lot of change in the social-issues climate.

"It's hard for me to believe that the merchants' public-private partnership is going to work unless there is some assurances that the mall is not going to be the way it was," Breznsy said.

"As a cultural phenomenon, Santa Cruz is quite capable of recovering and rebuilding — but in what form?" Grueneich said.

"Santa Cruz has been a community that tolerates and promotes innovative and personal expression. It is a mecca for those who are having difficulty adapting to a more traditional setting. Santa Cruz has a lot of old '60s folks who became successful business people," Grueneich said.

"It's not a '60s issue," Breznsy said. "A lot of small business people come from that background. It's not a hippie issue or a '60s lifestyle issue. It's an '80s issue, a soon-to-be '90s issue," Breznsy said. Since the quake, "Santa Cruz has changed for all its people, and that includes merchants and residents of the street."