

Business owners want action

Group calls on Santa Cruz council to halt economic 'slide'

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SANTA CRUZ — A group of mainstream and progressive business owners is calling on the city to take an active role in supporting local business and halting the economic "slide" that is weakening the Santa Cruz economy.

The call was issued in a preliminary report issued this week.

"You get the sense that the city is grasping for straws in trying to solve their economic woes," said Tom Brezsny, executive director of the Santa Cruz Area Restaurant Association. "A sense that they're running out of options.

"I think we're seeing a consensus arising that's not conservative or progressive," Brezsny said. "It's just a whole group of people saying that there's got to be a middle ground where we don't have to sacrifice our services and quality of life" to a sagging economy.

Financial crisis isn't just a headache for city bureaucrats — the city's sinking economy and looming budget deficit has gotten local business owners worried, too.

In an unusual round-table meeting, representatives from almost every corner of the Santa Cruz business world sat down with city planners last month to

discuss economic problems and solutions, and the city's future.

The meeting was attended by members of the Progressive Business Network, the Eastside Business Association, the Downtown Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Beach Area Business Association and several others. Mo Reich, chairman of the city Planning Commission, moderated the session.

"There was a real cross section of interests there," said Scott Roseman, director of the Progressive Business Network and owner of the Westside Community Market. "I think the differences

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(between the business groups) aren't as great as they once were; it's mostly a matter of degree. I personally see local and small businesses as important, because they have roots in a community. But if a large business wanted to come in ... help the tax base, and increase jobs, I'd have to support that."

In general the group feels that the local economy, which lost \$7.5 million in retail sales in 1987, is taking a beating because the city has no economic management plan.

The city's current General Plan barely mentions economic planning, and City Manager Richard Wilson admits that the city now has no master plan for the economy.

And with aggressive competition from business in Capitola, Scotts Valley and San Jose, business owners fear commerce in Santa Cruz will suffer in the future for inaction now.

"There was very little said about economic development in the 1980 General Plan," Brezsny said. "And the economy suffered for it. We don't want to pin blame on anybody ... but we don't want to make the same mistake this time."

"We've seen that the inability to build an auto plaza in the '70s led directly to the loss of three auto dealers" who left Santa Cruz in 1986, city planner Charlie Eadie said. "That led directly to the deficit in the General Fund, and to whether park benches get replaced or roads get paved."

The group also called on the city to change a bad attitude toward business.

"What is frustrating for business is the attitude of the city," Roseman said. "Whenever a business wants to change something, put up a sign or add a bathroom, you have to go through the bureaucracy and they abuse you. They're not supportive. If the city was a business, they would have been out of business long ago."

The roundtable group was convened by Eadie as part of the process of drawing up a new General Plan for 1990. The economic concerns meeting was one of a series called to discuss students' concerns, neighborhoods' concerns and environmentalists' concerns.

"It was an unofficial, ad-hoc

group," Eadie said. "We had a really good discussion, and tried to be constructive."

The meeting was so productive that the group plans to hold a larger meeting in May to turn its preliminary list of suggestions into a formal document that can be submitted to the Planning Commission.

Eventually, group members hope their suggestions can be incorporated into the new General Plan.

"The General Plan is the most important thing to be involved in right now," Brezsny said. "The General Plan will set the terms of debate ... it will determine what we'll be talking about in five years."