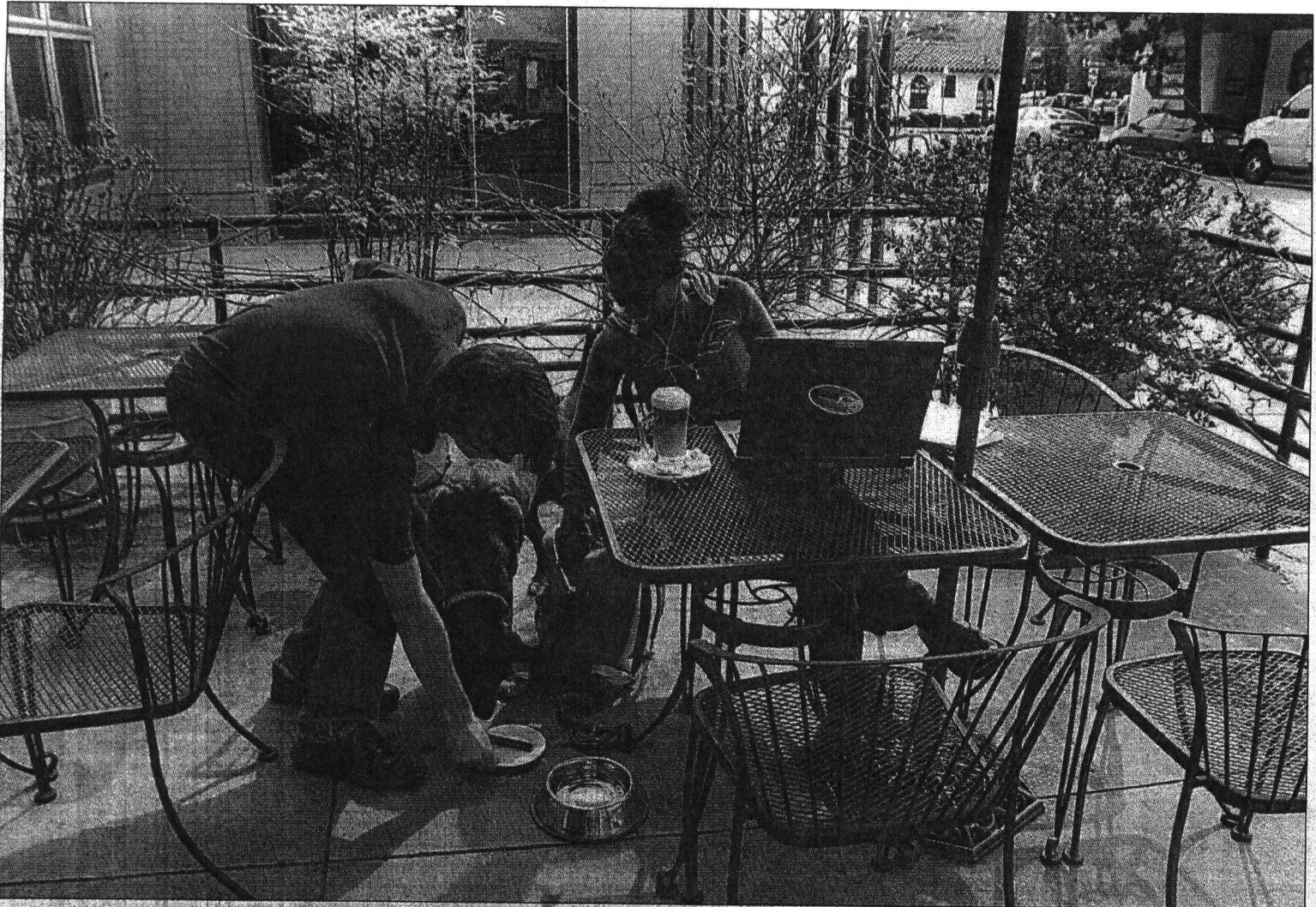




Pooches on Pacific?



SOME MERCHANTS SUPPORT OVERTURNING DOWNTOWN DOG BAN



UC Santa Cruz history student Melodie Thompson likes to bring her dog Mimi downtown to Cafe Limelight, where canines are welcomed with their own menu. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Group might ask City Council to repeal decades-old rule

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — After a long day of hauling organic apples and pears in her backpack, Sheba, an Aussie shepherd, likes to leave her sprawling orchard to meet friends for a bite to eat in town.

But she can't do it downtown. Instead, she and other members of Woofers and Walkers, a social club for canines and their owners, gather at pooch-friendly haunts on the Westside and at the harbor.

"If I could, I would meet a friend for a glass of wine or coffee," said owner Judy Wylie, who often brings Sheba along on

errands but has to leave her in the car. "There is no real way I could enjoy downtown."

Tired of losing out on business from potentially thousands of doggie die-hards like Wylie, downtown merchants are pushing to reverse decades-old rules banning dogs from Pacific Avenue and feeder streets. The move is also designed to boost the city's profile in the dog-friendly tourism market, a growing niche that's been a boon for Carmel and Los Gatos.

The Downtown Association board is expected to vote March 16 on whether to



Judy Wylie would like to take her dog Sheba downtown, but the closest she gets is the off-leash dog run at University Terrace on Meder Street. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

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recommend the City Council repeal the ban while also strengthening safeguards. Dogs would have to be leashed, vaccinated and licensed. Owners would be required to clean up after them and keep them under control.

"We know there are a lot of business districts appealing to dog owners," said Chip, the executive director of the Downtown Association who only goes by one name. "A lot of businesses would like to cater to a market that they can't now."

As head of a Downtown Association committee focused on civic engagement, Patty Zoccoli, co-owner of the Pacific Avenue deli that bears her family's name, is conducting a survey of merchants to see if they would support welcoming responsible dog owners and their pets.

"The vast majority are saying yes," she said. "I think it's going to happen."

Several council members say they would support studying a change, but not everyone agrees it's a good idea. Larry Pearson, owner of Pacific Cookie Co., said dogs could scare young children, create a tripping hazard with their leashes, fight and contribute to uncleanliness.

"You're inviting something to happen that, over a period of time, could be asking for a more dirty environment than currently exists, and I think that will hurt economics downtown," he said.

Attorney Brad Brereton agreed, saying the presence of dogs will only exacerbate loitering, panhandling and other behavioral eyesores that have fueled negative perceptions of downtown.

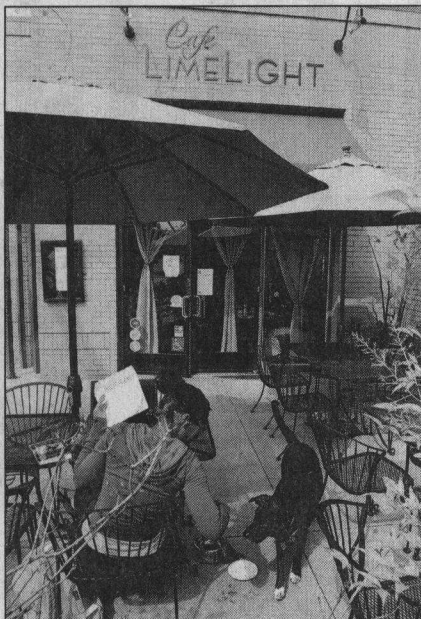
"If you let go of the dog ban, those same people will have dogs that are unruly and untethered," he said. "Downtown is hard enough to keep clean without adding dog piles to the sidewalk."

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Dogs have been banned from Pacific Avenue since 1976 and from feeder streets since 1985. The ban covers Locust Street, Church Street, Walnut Avenue and Lincoln Street between Cedar Street and Front Street. Dogs are not allowed on some public beaches within city limits, the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, or San Lorenzo Park and the Depot Park athletic field.

Downtown's hospitality guides made an estimated 1,700 contacts with dog owners last year. Hosts in the yellow-and-blue jacket reminded residents, tourists and transients alike about the ban. That figure nearly matches the agency's number of panhandling contacts.

Police write citations when owners refuse to remove their dogs, Lt. Rick Martinez said. Allowing dogs downtown would not cause police undue enforcement time as long as owners



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Cafe Limelight has a menu for dogs.

keep dogs leashed and controlled, he said. The Public Works Department's new street scrubber could quickly clean up waste, he said.

Henry Brzezinski, general manager for the county Animal Services Authority, said he foresees no problems with lifting the ban as long as signs make the rules clear and enforcement is consistent.

Brzezinski said there is an estimated 33,750 dog-owning households in the county and about 54,000 total dogs, based on a population-based formula created by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Whitney Wilde, who founded the advocacy group Walkers and Woofers two years ago, started a petition on the club's Web site to repeal the ban, saying many of those thousands of dog owners would spend more money downtown if they could bring their pets.

"It would be one of the best things the downtown area ever did for downtown," said Wilde, who owns an 80-pound Belgian malinois named Gigi. "My dog is with me all the time. I tend to shop places where she can shop with me."

The club wants strict regulations to accompany a repeal of the ban, including leashes no longer than 6 feet, a \$500 fine for failing to pick up feces and the right of police and downtown hospitality hosts to ask an owner to remove an aggressive dog. The group also hopes to fund some biohazard bags to place on trash cans downtown.

Councilman Tony Madrigal, who owns a miniature dachshund named Shortie, said he wants to ensure that making downtown more dog-friendly will reap economic benefits while not creating a law enforcement problem or health hazard.

"Sometimes people will not go anywhere without their pets, and that's a reality," he said. "We can't afford to rule out new possibilities to make our downtown more attractive."

Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews agreed, saying, "I think it's entirely appropriate to open the question."

MISSING OUT?

Except for food service establishments, dogs are allowed inside Santa Cruz businesses if owners approve. Aldo's and Seabright Brewery allow dogs on their patios, and Cafe Limelight offers a doggie menu that includes Milk Bones for \$2.50 and roasted turkey meat for \$4.75.

Any evidence about how much business Santa Cruz loses because of the dog ban is anecdotal. But officials in Carmel say their dog-friendly reputation draws scores of tourists to dine alfresco and stay overnight in hotels that welcome pets, including Doris Day's Cypress Inn.

"We are definitely seeing people who come here because they can bring dogs," said Lisa Budlong, who manages the Visitor Center for the Carmel Chamber of Commerce. She said merchants have never complained to her about the city's open-door policy.

Cindi Mitchell, an animal services officer with the Carmel Police Department, said most visitors and tourists follow the leash law, as well as rules about cleaning up waste. In recent years, there have only been a handful of incidents involving dog bites and fights.

"The rates of incidents are very, very low if you look at the amount of dogs and the time that goes by," Mitchell said. "People seem to understand, in a congested area like that, the importance of having a dog on a leash."

Maggie Ivy, who heads the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council, said lifting the dog ban "wouldn't be a negative, I don't think." She said the agency does receive a fair number of inquiries from dog owners about pet-friendly hotels, beaches and parks in the area.

"We know it's a niche market, not necessarily a huge market," Ivy said. "We would also be concerned for locals and visitors that people are following rules."

Pearson, the Pacific Cookie Co. owner opposed to undoing the ban, said he understands the argument that merchants are missing out because downtown is not considered dog friendly. But, he said, "We're not known as alligator-friendly either, and I don't know what effect that would have on us."

However, supporters say lifting the ban might actually address a questionable increase in the number of service dogs downtown — a recent trend that has created some resentment. Officials say homeless people have increasingly been claiming they need dogs for reasons protected by federal disability laws. Once they make that claim, it's difficult for authorities to force them to remove the dogs.

"There are some feelings that that is being abused, but we're put in position that we have to proceed cautiously," Lt. Martinez said.

Chip, the Downtown Association director, said, "My suspicion is there are a lot of people exploiting that who aren't needing service dogs. The downtown hosts have to tell everybody about dogs not being allowed downtown, and it looks like selective enforcement and is a turn-off for tourists."