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Chamber, mayor disagree about downtown

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SANTA CRUZ — Shoppers are avoiding downtown Santa Cruz and won't come back until more police patrol the city's main shopping and business district, the president of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce says.

In a column published recently in the May issue of the chamber's "Business Santa Cruz" newsletter,

Chamber President Jim Thompson, a lawyer downtown, also wrote that the present Santa Cruz City Council is unlikely to support police cleaning up "the drug and alcohol problem downtown."

Those comments seemed to infuriate at least one council member — Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt — who said Wednesday that any allegation the council is not supportive of the Police Department is "absolutely untrue."

Wormhoudt described Thompson's column as "potshots" and said his views about the council's support of the Police Department were "an incredible affront."

Thompson wrote that as a result of police brutality charges, trials and lawsuits earlier in the decade "and the 'liberal' nature of the pro-

gressive's active constituency, the Santa Cruz police are more likely to get a figurative 'hand slap' for a violation of civil liberties than congratulations for effort."

Wormhoudt responded, "I very deeply resent that."

The council enjoys an "extremely good working relationship" with the Police Department, she said, adding that she has personally congratulated the police for their work on numerous occasions.

Police Chief Jack Bassett said Thompson's comments about the council's support were "patently untrue — they do not interfere with the Police Department."

Thompson reiterated Wednesday that he does not think the Police

Department has gotten the support needed to make shoppers feel safer along the Pacific Garden Mall or to discourage drug dealers, winos and panhandlers from hanging out there.

Thompson's comments about the police presence were only part of his observations on the city's efforts at solving some of the problems downtown merchants have long complained about.

Calling downtown "an important economic resource" that is in "trouble," Thompson said shoppers won't return until they believe it is safe.

As it is, said the chamber president, both merchants and consumers still feel that downtown has "gone to hell."

Thompson said that while the council has been trying to improve the business climate downtown, "it's not enough."

Thompson wrote, "The downtown cannot be permitted to slide further without seriously risking its ability to recover economically."

"The downtown area ... has suffered for a significant period of time. It has suffered from a lack of competent attention by the city itself. The City Council has been content to point to what it considered normal or improved retail sales and has ignored the developing reality."

Thompson also criticized unnamed council members, observing, "There are many who believe that the majority of the council members are simply personally and politically unable to take the necessary steps." But, Thompson said, he did not personally "believe this to be the case."

The council's progressive majority has been portrayed by opponents as having put money into social programs at the expense of city services, such as police protection.

Wormhoudt said Wednesday that the council recognizes problems exist downtown, and is trying to deal with them through various city and county agencies, such as police and mental health. She also noted that the council has recently approved spending \$15,000 on refurbishing the mall's landscaping, approved a study about public uses of the north end of the mall, talked to merchants about better store windows and staying open longer, considered better streetlighting downtown and approved the use of outdoor eating tables outside a mall delicatessen. In addition, the mayor said, she has convened a task force looking into turning a movie theater on Pacific Avenue into a performing arts center.

The council is "incredibly committed to improving" downtown, she said, adding that she has personally spent "a lot of my own time" working on downtown problems.

One of the biggest barriers

toward beefing up the police presence downtown has been a lack of money. Police Chief Bassett's request last year for \$279,000 for a directed patrol that would fight drug dealing in specific areas of the city was turned down by the council, since the budget already faced a \$1 million deficit. It was balanced by making across-the-board cuts in the requests by various city departments and by hiking taxes.

Bassett said the department has recently transferred a beach-area detail to the downtown area. This patrol, he said, has made a "dramatic difference" in the number of complaints the department gets from merchants about problems downtown, as well as driving drug dealers away, if only temporarily.

But, said Bassett, this patrol will be reassigned back to the beach area because of the approaching summer tourist season.

Nor did the chief hold out much hope for next year's budget having enough money to hire additional police for the mall.

"Everybody seems to want it, but it's a big-ticket item," Bassett observed.

Wormhoudt said any proposal to increase parking fines "would have to be advanced" by downtown merchants instead of the council itself.

John Mills, who works downtown and is active in work on downtown issues, said he doesn't favor any increase in fines.

But Mills, while saying "the council has done everything it can" to solve downtown problems, also said he believes Bassett and the Police Department can do more to be "creative" by making "the best use of what they have" already.

As it is, Mills said, police usually react to events rather than disrupting illegal activities such as drug transactions before they occur.

Mills, active in liberal and progressive groups and causes in the city, praised Chamber President Thompson, calling him "articulate" and possessing "a good grasp of what business needs downtown."

Thompson's recent public stands, Mills said, represent a turn-around for the Chamber of Commerce, which has been widely viewed by some downtown merchants as ineffective or absent on business issues.

REFERENCE