

# Showdown over bias, beauty and bucks

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Whether in pin-striped suits or "Dykes from Hell" T-shirts, there were few fence-sitters in the crowd Tuesday night as Santa Cruz squared off against itself in a boisterous public showdown over the city's controversial anti-discrimination ordinance.

An estimated 500 people filled the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium to debate a city council proposal outlawing job and housing discrimination based on sexual preference, height, weight and most explosive — personal appearance.

After three hours of testimony, frequently punctuated by loud applause and heckling from the evenly split crowd, the council had not voted.

With eight TV crews looming at his side, Mayor Don Lane opened the session by asking people for restraint "to prevent this from becoming a circus atmosphere."

The ordinance would make Santa Cruz's anti-bias laws among the most strict in the nation.

The widest support came from people representing various local activist groups. They praised the proposal as vital in ending bigotry against job applicants whose

hair, weight or size does not conform to society's stereotypes about beauty.

"Almost every study shows that women considered attractive are more likely to get hired for a job," said Dawn Atkins to cheers. "Laws don't get rid of bigots, but they do give us protection."

Atkins, representing the Body Image Task Force, lobbied Councilman Neal Coonerty to include the personal appearance language when he drafted the law several months ago as a counter to Gov. Pete Wilson's veto of a state gay-rights bill.

Opposition was led by business groups. Speakers said the ordinance was vague-

ly written, unconstitutional and would inflict costly lawsuits on small-business owners still struggling to stay alive in post-earthquake downtown.

Even though the ordinance allows most dress codes "in furtherance of a reasonable business purpose," critics said merchants shouldn't have to worry about getting sued for denying a job to someone with tattoos, sloppy clothes or a pierced tongue.

"Prospective employees need to make reasonable accommodations to meet the employers' requirements," said Jo Ann Dlott, a vice president of the Seaside Co.,

which owns the beach boardwalk.

"My name is Gloria Nieto," one supporter told the council. "I'm a Chicana, a lesbian and vertically challenged."

Minutes later:

"My name is Anthony Correia," said a critic. "I'm here representing heterosexual white males who work for a living."

Besieged by a cacophony of hisses, Correia dragged to the podium an inflatable sex doll sporting a padded stomach and a pierced tongue.

"Hire me, or I'll sue," said the doll's T-shirt.