

Rebuilding downtown ranks high on new mayor's agenda

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11-27-90
SANTA CRUZ — Outside the City Council chamber, new Mayor Jane Yokoyama's sense of humor shone through.

She laughed and talked easily as a photographer posed her for her first news photo as mayor. Would she pose with a cat that wandered by? "Sure," Yokoyama said, and picked up the cat and smiled for the camera. She said she hoped her Samoyed, "Sam," who was waiting

for her in her car at the curb, would not see.

Inside the council chamber, Yokoyama said she should be all-business.

"I think I take my time in public very seriously," she said Monday. "I feel it's important for the public to see you taking their matters seriously and I've been very careful to let people know that I do," she said.

That is part of the reason, she said, that she may have been perceived as being quiet during her

first two years on the council.

"I was also new to the council and new to politics," said Yokoyama. She said she marveled at how former Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt and Councilman John Laird had so much information at their fingertips.

Those two, she said, carried on much of the debate that she might have had they not been on the council.

But now with those two veterans

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Mayor Yokoyama, with stray cat, displays her humorous side.

Mayor

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gone, Yokoyama, as mayor, will be looked to for leadership.

Laird said Monday he expects Yokoyama to "rise to the occasion."

Yokoyama said she is excited about the year ahead. She said the newness of the council — three of the seven council members were elected to their first term Nov. 6 — presents an opportunity to form a cohesive group. "My hope is that we can really work as a team," she said.

As for herself, Yokoyama said she is "willing to take the knocks on the hard decisions" ahead.

Yokoyama has an agenda, topped by the rebuilding of downtown Santa Cruz.

She emphasized that priority during her interview. "There is a total commitment on my part," she said.

She expects the downtown rebuilding plan, which emphasizes retail development, a plaza area and heavy landscaping, to win wide acceptance.

"The plan says something to everyone. It says the right things to the property owners and the retailers and it says the right things to those who will be gathering places," Yokoyama said.

The biggest obstacle to rebuilding lies in the financial arena. "I don't think the (lending institutions) are willing to take on the full commitment they would in better economic times," Yokoyama said.

She said the problem is not the Santa Cruz economy per se, but a slumping national economy. She said she would do whatever she could to attract lenders to the area.

It was when Yokoyama became involved in the 1988 Jesse Jackson presidential campaign that she decided that she should make a bid for local office, and, in the November election that year she was the

top vote-getter.

Yokoyama, who declined to state her age, came to the council talking about issues of human rights and hoping to improve living conditions in the Beach Flats area.

She said she realized that in order to make changes in the Beach Flats she needed to get involved in the political process. "Politicians are the decision makers," she said. Improving the Beach Flats is still a main priority and, she said, she believes that can be addressed while the council works on rebuilding downtown.

She wants the city to work on building-code enforcement in the flats. That won't detract from rebuilding, she said, because it involves a different part of the Planning Department.

And, Yokoyama wants to work to encourage private development of housing in the beach area. She said she has been able to form business and residential partnerships in the flats and wants to see more of that happen.

Yokoyama is employed as director of the Santa Cruz County Immigration Project, based in Watsonville. By providing information, counseling and referrals, the project helps people legalize their status in light of the 1986 and '90 immigration bills.

A renter who lives on the westside, Yokoyama moved to Santa Cruz from Santa Barbara 12 years ago. Raised in Santa Barbara, she moved here to attend graduate school at UC Santa Cruz, and stayed on for six years to teach Spanish and social change in the Third World at UCSC.

In addition to her job and her new role as mayor, Yokoyama coaches in the Special Olympics and said she is trying to learn Nintendo after getting creamed at the game by her nephew at Thanksgiving.