

# City tries to brighten problem corner

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## Pacific Ave New lights show discord on council

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SANTA CRUZ — The installation of temporary street lights designed to shine on nighttime lawbreakers at the notorious northwest corner of Pacific Avenue and Cathcart Street has stirred discontent among council members.

"It's embarrassing when these god-awful, ugly lights just appear on Pacific Avenue ... and we don't know anything about it," said Councilman Scott Kennedy. "When the council votes on every bench in the downtown area, I think a decision like this should have come to the full council."

Mayor Cynthia Mathews is the one who asked staff to consider putting up the two street lights. Mathews said her request was based on a recommendation from a Downtown Association committee, which was trying to find new ways to solve the long-term social and legal problems at the spot known as "Hippie Corner."

"I think we have to respond when there's a focus area that's got such a chronic history of problems," said Mathews. "And this solution was relatively inexpensive."

Councilman Mike Rotkin supported Mathews, pointing out that the council had agreed a year ago to beef up lighting and increase police patrols in that area as a way to solve the problems. He questioned why Kennedy and Councilwoman Katherine Beiers would be upset about the temporary lights.

"If they owned a business down there and were losing their shirts, they might have a different attitude," said Rotkin. "If they think the area is attractive as it is now, they're in denial."

Chris Schneider, assistant director of the Public Works Department, said the two high-pressure sodium vapor lights were taken from the city's surplus stock. The cost to install them was little more than the staff time required to dig the holes and put them up.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

One of the two light standards at Cathcart Street and Pacific Avenue that have upset some City Council members.

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Schneider said the lights, which were installed last week, were expected to be turned on for the first time Wednesday night, if crews from Pacific Gas & Electric Co. managed to hook them up in time.

Beiers said she may ask the council to review the decision, if for no other reason than to cement what kind of issues should be brought to the full council before being undertaken by staff members, even at the direction of the mayor.

"It really ticked me off," said Beiers about installation of the two lights without council approval. "You work on Pacific Avenue and love it, and then staff goes off and does something like this."

Mathews emphasized, however, that the lights were a temporary security measure to cut down on the drug-dealing and other criminal and anti-social acts that still occur at the Pacific/Cathcart corner.

In fact, said John Craver, president of the Downtown Association's board of directors, the lights were requested not only to curtail criminal activity, but to help elderly residents at the nearby El Centro apartments.

"I think the lights will go a long way toward making people feel safe and secure downtown," said Craver. "I think it's a good idea."

Valerie Schlafke, an administrator with the John Stewart Co., which manages the building that includes the El Centro, said tenants had complained about being aggressively panhandled, cursed and intimidated to the point they didn't want to go outside at night.

"It's not like people get mugged out here, but they do get harassed," said Schlafke. "That's a drag, across the street from your own home you can't even walk in peace. ... The idea for the lights was that at night there's quite a crowd at that corner, and generally crowds like that don't like to hang out under bright lights."

Deputy Police Chief Jeff Locke said he believes that targeted enforcement efforts at the corner over the past year have dramatically curtailed the illegal activity.

"We believe we still have drug-dealing going on, so we're always vigilant," said Locke, adding, however, that only "a real minority of people force the issue now."

Locke said that as many as 99 percent of the people who hang

out on the corner "generally are very cooperative" when informed by police that their conduct is illegal or improper.

Mathews said the lights would be removed once a new building goes up on the old Ford's department store lot at the corner. But officials at Barry Swenson Builders, co-owner of the lot, have said they're still looking for tenants.

Ceil Cirillo, executive director of the city's Redevelopment Agency, said Tuesday that constructing the necessary parking for a new building that could include another theater also has been a stumbling block for the company.

Kennedy said a new building, not temporary measures, is the only answer to curtailing improper behavior at that corner.

"The solution ... lies in development, not these kind of 'pissanty' things they're doing, like those planter strips," said Kennedy.

The planter strips were installed by the Parks and Recreation Department last year to beautify the area in front of Pacific Avenue's vacant lots. The strips also made it more difficult for panhandlers to legally sit on the sidewalks.