

Forum takes on downtown issues

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Pacific Avenue's social deviants were the focus of concern at a forum for City Council candidates Thursday sponsored by the Downtown Association.

"It isn't getting any better, it's getting worse," said Julie Hendee, co-owner of Cat N' Canary at Pacific Avenue and Cathcart Street. "It's getting more violent (in that area). It's more edgy."

Hendee's comment that business at her clothing store had dropped more than \$300,000 in three years because people were loathe to walk through the tran-

SC Council candidates voice concerns

sients and ragamuffins around the old Ford's lot drew gasps from fellow merchants.

Police have reported that the crowd at what's known as "Hippie Corner" across from Cat N' Canary generally is not violent. But downtown merchants pleaded for help from the council candidates.

"I don't think we'll be getting any big retailers down there until something's done about this," said Pizza My Heart owner Keith Holtaway, adding that scofflaws have grown so brazen they come inside his

business to panhandle customers.

Painting an even grimmer picture was council candidate Dennis Johnston, who is a downtown social worker.

Johnston said he had been "yelling and screaming" for two years about the drug problem downtown. He said people are making a lot of money dealing marijuana, mushrooms and heroin on Pacific Avenue from Cathcart to Elm streets.

Johnston acknowledged that the city's decision two

weeks ago to use park rangers to augment police downtown has made a dent in the problems because police can concentrate on the more serious illegal behavior.

Like most of the nine candidates attending the forum, Johnston said passing a curfew law for young people would alleviate many of the social problems occurring downtown.

Candidate Jane Walton, who teaches adult education, said Santa Cruz residents "may have reached the point that the limits of tolerance have been reached." Walton said existing ordinances governing such be-

Please see SC COUNCIL — BACK PAGE

A-10 — Friday, Sept. 20, 1996 — Sentinel

SC council candidates

Continued from Page A1

havior as aggressive panhandling and lying on sidewalks must be rigorously enforced by police who are supported by an iron-willed council and a court system that doesn't mete out mild punishments to chronic law-breakers.

"The issue is who owns the street," said Walton.

Candidate Michael Hernandez, a plumber, caterer and member of the Citizens Police Review Board, was the most adamant about the current council's folly in not passing a curfew.

Hernandez went so far as to suggest that parents be billed for police time when a youngster is picked up for violating the curfew.

He also said existing ordinances must be enforced, which would give a clear signal that "if you choose to live in Santa Cruz and not respect other people's property ... you can choose to live somewhere else."

Downtown businessman Chad Waters, who owns a real-estate office, said the illicit behavior is hurting the city's chance of finding investors for the significant lots that remain unbuilt.

"I wouldn't put a new business downtown like it is now, so how can you expect someone else to?" he asked.

Waters said City Council attempts to shift the burden of fixing downtown to merchants is wrong.

"Your job is to grow your businesses," he told merchants. "The City Council's job is to create an atmosphere that allows you to do that."

Incumbent Katherine Beiers, along with fellow Council Members Mike Rotkin and Cynthia Mathews, resisted simply passing a curfew without addressing underlying causes of teen-age misbehavior.

Beiers said the loitering and drug problem at Pacific Avenue and Cathcart Street was exacerbated by the decision to fence the old lot.

"We're talking about downtown being our living room," said Beiers. "What we've done there is provide a recreation room."

She suggested that downtown merchants and customers "take back" the neighborhood by refusing to be intimidated.

Candidate David Silva, a social worker and leader in the local Green Party, said more emphasis must be given to solving the root cause of homelessness.

"Homeless people should have self-determination," said Silva.

Silva suggested that the behavior ordinances would be more effective, and fairer, if police would enforce them uniformly rather than singling out people for the way they look.

'I don't think we'll be getting any big retailers down there until something's done about this.'

— Keith Holtaway,
owner, Pizza My Heart

"We have to be very, very careful not to create more alienation," said Silva.

Rotkin said "it would be a mistake" to associate the deviant behavior occurring downtown with the problem of homelessness. The issue, he said, centers on a small group of people intent on causing problems.

"The notion there's a merchant conspiracy to drive people off the streets because of how they look is outrageous," said Rotkin. "We must make a commitment to make downtown safe."

He pointed out the council already had committed itself to \$1 million more a year to put additional police on the streets.

Eleanor Eisenberg, a lawyer making her first run for the council, said relying only on police solutions would be shortsighted.

She said the root issues are a lack of affordable housing, too few places for teens to gather and no effective job-training program.

"We have a lot going on downtown and in Santa Cruz generally which I think is pretty compelling," said Eisenberg. "Despite the problems, I'm hopeful."

Mathews said rebuilding on all the vacant lots downtown is a key factor in ending the aggressive panhandling and stopping gangs of people from sitting on sidewalks. (Existing ordinances prohibit such behavior near building entrances.)

"The social issues downtown are the ones that need the closest attention," said Mathews. "It's very important that we set a social expectation. ... And then we must enforce the ordinances."

She said city officials also must work with the District Attorney's Office and judges to ensure that when people are cited and arrested for these illicit behaviors, the system doesn't treat them as unimportant cases.

There are four City Council seats open in this year's election. The voting takes place Nov. 5.