

# Chamber president resigns

Lisher cites health, 'intensity' of job as reasons for move

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SANTA CRUZ — John Lisher, who led the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce during two and a half of its most trying years, has announced he will resign.

Lisher, 60, said he only recently decided to step down as president and chief executive. He told chamber chairman Harvey Nickelson and staff members last week, and formally told the board of directors Monday night at the regular board meeting. Most were surprised.

"I decided it was time to step aside," Lisher said Tuesday after returning from a lecture on earthquake preparedness in Southern California. "It is an intense job. You can only take that intensity for so long."

Lisher said the decision "kind of came up." He had no longstanding plans to quit. He also is active in the California Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives, and he said that when the combination of meetings, speeches and other events are stacked end to end, "you feel like you end up throwing energy in all directions."

Lisher said he is not sure what he will do next. He and his wife Juleen own Artisans' Gallery, which will move from one of the pavilions to the Neary Building on Pacific Avenue the end of next month. Lisher said he will work in the business, but also just plans to take some time off.

Lisher mentioned concerns for his health and the stress of the job in comments to the board Monday night, but sought to assure members that there "is no death knell hanging over my head."

He said he has high blood pressure for which he takes medication. "I hate taking pills," he said. "I didn't take pills before I started this job."

Lisher's resignation was met with surprise and regret by Santa Cruz City Council members, who credited him with fostering a more congenial relationship

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John Lisher

'...Time to step aside.'

## Lisher

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between government and business. Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane said he "had no inkling" of Lisher's resignation until informed Tuesday.

"He had a real constructive attitude," Lane said, noting that Lisher's background in government helped him understand how municipal governments work. Lisher served one term on the San Jose City Council in the late 1960s.

Lisher is widely regarded as a consensus-builder, not only between government and business but also between various often-feuding business groups.

Lisher was a key member of Vision Santa Cruz, the 36-member group that planned post-earthquake rebuilding downtown, said Councilman Neal Coonerty.

"He is one of the people who really made the public-private partnership work when there was a lot of distrust," Coonerty said. "I'm really sorry he is leaving."

Jane Yokoyama called Lisher a "critical piece in the rebuilding."

Most of Lisher's tenure was involved in dealing with post-earthquake Santa Cruz. The 7.1-magnitude quake struck three months to the day after Lisher became chamber chief executive, forever changing business as it was known in Santa Cruz.

Lisher said he is most proud of the work with Vision Santa Cruz and with the chamber's Transportation Management Association, a traffic-reduction effort begun in July 1990.

Nickelson, chamber chairman and chief executive of Coast Commercial Bank, said the group's executive board will meet Thursday to organize a search for a successor. Nickelson said he plans to invite other civic leaders to the meeting, including past chamber presidents and directors of the Conference and Visitors Council and Downtown Association.

It's not clear what the position would pay; Lisher declined to state his salary.

Nickelson said he has heard already from several people interested in the job. One announced candidate is Mike Schmidt, a business consultant and former Bank of

America Santa Cruz branch manager. Schmidt is chamber vice chairman for community affairs and sits on the executive committee. He said he will withdraw from the committee because he is interested in the chief executive job.

The new chief executive will have to contend with a Chamber of Commerce struggling with financial difficulties. Lisher said the chamber risks having a zero balance at the end of the year unless dues payments pick up.

As small business goes, so goes the chamber, Lisher said. "Small business is hurt in this county, very hurt," he said. The chamber has suffered a falloff in dues from its 1,050 members, he said. "A lot of people are dragging their feet paying their dues."