

City may steam clean Pacific Avenue sidewalks, after all

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SANTA CRUZ.— Downtown's patchwork of grime-sucking sidewalks has been a thorn in the city's side ever since the first cup of coffee was spilled on the newly installed pavement nearly four years ago.

That all may change on July 1.

Members of the city's Parks and Recreation Commission are considering a budget recommendation to the City Council that would include money for regular steam cleaning of the entire sidewalk area.

"This is all very preliminary," said Jim Lang, director of the Parks and Recreation Department, which is responsible for maintaining downtown. "But we're very aware that keeping areas clean and making people feel comfortable or welcome ... has a tremendous draw to it."

The verbal tug-of-war between merchants and the city over who should

clean the sidewalks has been going on since the summer of 1992, when the \$500,000 pathways were poured and sandblasted. The porous finish immediately began soaking up dirt and spills, and the large cracks between the panels of pavement became magnets for cigarette butts.

Despite complaints, city officials stood firm on their initial decision to steam clean only the portion of sidewalks from the curb to the inside of the benches and tree planters. The rest of the sidewalk continued to be the responsibility of merchants.

John Lisher, owner of Artisans and a member of several downtown organizations, is among those merchants who pay to regularly steam clean sidewalks in front of their stores.

"If the rest of the (merchants) don't do theirs, we have a clean strip from the curb to the benches, and then this patchwork in the rest of the area," said Lisher. "Some of the sidewalks are just getting disgusting."

In addition to those areas where merchants choose not to pay for private steam cleaning, there are several vacant lots and empty buildings where the sidewalks go unattended.

A solution to the long-discussed issue so far has revolved around money.

But Lang said it's time to re-evaluate the situation.

The change of heart comes in part because increased pedestrian traffic downtown has generated more problems ... and more sales tax that the city could pour back into maintaining the area.

In addition, said Lang, several side streets off Pacific Avenue now have been redeveloped, and the city must fund a plan for maintaining those areas, too.

"We want to transfer the same level of service that's on Pacific Avenue to the side streets," said Lang. "We figure you can either ignore it and say, 'That's the way it's going to be,' or you can deal with it."

Bookshop Santa Cruz owner Neal Coonerty, who was on the City Council when the decision was made to continue cleaning only part of the sidewalks, said the change of heart likely reflects the increased tax revenue generated by a rejuvenated downtown.

"I have mixed feelings about it," Coonerty said about the plan being considered by the commission. "It's great, but I hate to see these people who have done a tremendous job (cleaning the sidewalks as a private business) lose out to the city."

The business, Coyote Industrial, was started by off-duty city workers in response to the city's refusal to steam clean the entire sidewalk area. They have been contracting with merchants to clean in front of individual storefronts.

But Lang said any proposal from the commission could include a recommendation that the city contract with a private company to provide regular steam cleaning.