

Pacific Ave. Santa Cruz aims to fence off trouble

Open lot lures street people who scare off shoppers, merchants say

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Santa Cruz officials plan to completely fence off the former Ford's department store site to discourage youths from hanging out there.

The move, which the city council is expected to approve at today's meeting, is evidence of the

growing frustration by city officials and downtown merchants over the corner lot.

Located at Pacific Avenue and Cathcart Street, the lot has been vacant since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed Ford's department store. Under an agreement with the owner, it has since been used by the city

for parking, providing stalls for up to 59 cars.

But the lot has also become a gathering ground for panhandlers, street people and young Grateful Dead fans, in part because it is one of few places where downtown ordinances allow people to gather. The laws, enacted to shoo panhandlers away, prohibit loitering in front of stores but do not cover the large, empty lot.

The corner lot is often called "hippie corner" or "the cage" by

those who hang around there.

Merchants have complained that the scruffy-looking gathering scares off shoppers and hurts business. They also blame it for the failure to attract merchants to the site.

"It's just nothing but grief in there," said downtown commission member and businessman John Lisher. "You get an area like that and people are just going to stay away. They're intimidated by that, and the people on the corner know that. This is simply

a matter of making it look better."

City officials, too, have been frustrated by the lot. Police have reported problems with drug dealing and loitering.

The property is fenced along Pacific Avenue and Cathcart Street, but open in the back to allow access to cars. City staff members have proposed fencing the lot. Public Works Director Larry Erwin said the loss of 59 parking spaces would not be a

serious problem.

Vice Mayor Cynthia Mathews, however, said she would prefer to close off part of the lot to leave some parking spaces.

Property owner Andy Duncan is selling the land to San Jose developer Barry Swenson after years of trying to put another department store on the lot. Swenson project manager Becky Menne said the building company has no objection to fencing off the lot.