

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

ABOVE: Eastside businessman Jim Gorman says graffiti-removal costs him about \$1,000 a month.

BELOW: Scratches and etchings mar this window on Doyle Street.

Eastside merchants target taggers

Crime + Criminals - Graffiti

By **DAN WHITE**
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Soquel Avenue merchants are fed up with people spray-painting their walls, scraping their windows and making their businesses look ugly.

No part of the city is vandal-proof, but Eastside business owners are so tired of the problem, they have been brainstorming solutions.

The crude markings on Soquel Avenue are illegal and ugly, and could never be confused with graffiti art, merchants said.

Mark Michel, co-owner of the Bicycle Trip on Soquel Avenue, said the vandalism goes in cycles. He doesn't think taggers are targeting specific businesses for any reason except location; the graffiti marks territory.

Santa Cruz police say they have noticed a general increase in tagging during the past few months. Sgt. Steve Clark said police have been working on the problem but was reluctant to give away any trade secrets.

He said identifying and prosecuting taggers requires hours of legwork. But he said taggers help build cases against themselves by using the same identifying marks when they hit buildings.

"For instance, if Joe Blow's tag is 'XYZ,' once we identify that person, we go back and prosecute back cases," he said.

Clark said tagging has been a problem on the Eastside but added that police also hear complaints of graffiti downtown. He called taggers "thrill-seekers" who want street status and notoriety.

"They try to get their tag known out there," he said.

He said most taggers are in junior high or high school, though some are in their early 20s. Taggers judge their tags on the level of difficulty and risk, how large the tag is and how visible it is, which is why police encourage merchants to erase painted tags as quickly as possible, Clark said.

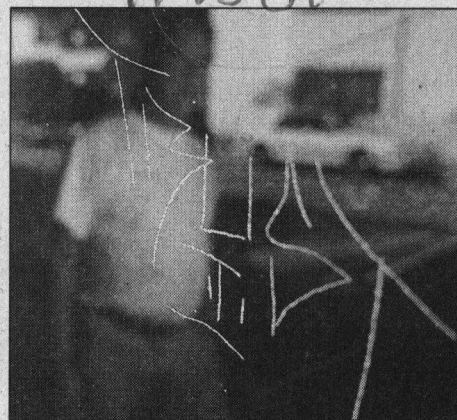
The merchants take the tagging personally and say the economic downturn makes the expense of painting over graffiti difficult to bear.

"It is frustrating for a business owner who takes pride and does a lot of hard work," Michel said. "None of us are making more than a decent living at best. We all take it like a personal affront."

Mark Swanson, who owns the One Double Oh Seven bar with his wife, Beverly, jokes that the walls have been repainted so many times they are getting thicker.

Taggers hit the bar's outside walls and even did some damage inside. Someone scratched up the men's bathroom mirror and two pinball machines.

"This is what we do all the time," said James



Gorman, One Double Oh Seven manager, walking through an alley and pointing to gray squares where staff painted over graffiti.

The merchants hope some simple changes will reduce the problem. They are asking for more police patrols and are increasing their efforts to clean up the spray-painted messages quickly. Some businesses are considering security cameras or replaceable film to protect window panes from scraping. The protective covering is expensive to replace but less costly than replacing a large window.

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