

✓CF Crime + Criminals - Graffiti

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Santa Cruz OKs crackdown on graffiti

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The Santa Cruz City Council approved tough new rules Tuesday night designed to clean up Santa Cruz's spreading graffiti blight.

By a 6-0 vote, council members backed a plan that would require property owners to paint over graffiti on their buildings — or have the city do it and, in some cases, send them a bill.

The draft ordinance also would require businesses to keep spray cans and wide-tip marking pens behind their counters to cut back on shoplifting by graffiti taggers.

"What I think this does is try to make the entire community re-

sponsible for the problem," said Councilman Mike Rotkin.

No one spoke against the new plan, which comes amid growing frustration in Santa Cruz as hundreds of houses, businesses and public facilities have been defaced by "crews" of vandals competing for attention.

It was supported by the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce and Graffiti Removal Volunteers of Santa Cruz, a grass-roots organization that repaints buildings covered with obscenities, cryptic logos and gang symbols.

The ordinance is scheduled to face a final vote Sept. 14 and would become law 30 days afterward, if approved. There are indi-

cations other cities in Santa Cruz County will use it as a model.

Under the ordinance, city work crews would be able to paint over any graffiti on private property that is visible from the street if the property owner fails to do so 72 hours after being notified.

Chances are, the colors would not match. "Battle issue gray," predicted Councilman Louis Ritenhouse. In most cases, the property owner would not be billed.

In more severe cases, such as abandoned buildings that have been covered with gang graffiti, the police chief could order the property owner in writing to

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paint over the mess. If no action were taken in 10 days, city crews could do the work.

The city would then bill the owner for paint, labor and administrative costs, and would place a tax lien against the property if the bill went unpaid.

City parks workers, graffiti volunteers or prison inmates on work furlough likely would do most of the public cleanup jobs.

State law already makes it illegal for anyone under 18 to purchase spray paint.

Santa Cruz's ordinance goes a step further. Store owners could not openly display spray cans or marking pens with tips wider than 4 millimeters. Numerous cit-

ies have begun imposing similar rules after the state Supreme Court upheld a Los Angeles ordinance earlier this year over the objections of a paint industry group.

Merchants who ignored the rules, or uncooperative property owners, could be hit with a \$250 citation beyond the cost of repainting. Many graffiti taggers who are arrested are charged with felonies and can face jail time. Minors can spend time in Juvenile Hall and open their parents to liability for cleanup costs.

Police Chief Jack Bassett said he believes the community is running out of patience.

"It is not art," Bassett said. "It's blight."

One area the ordinance does not address is glass etching.

Twice this year, vandals have broken into the city Metro bus yard at night and carved logos into bus windows. Each time, repair costs have approached \$80,000.

On June 21, Santa Cruz police arrested three teen-age boys on charges of scratching windows and spray painting more than 50 buildings along Pacific Avenue.

"If graffiti vandals weren't so malicious, you'd almost consider them pathetic," said Santa Cruz Mayor Neal Coonerty.

In other business, the council:

■ Imposed a \$4 fee for dumping mattress box springs at the city's landfill on Dimeo Lane. Until now, landfill workers accepted box springs free of charge and recycled them, but because of a glut, buyers have become scarce.

■ Approved a plan to prohibit new bars, liquor stores and convenience stores from selling alcohol within 500 feet of schools, residential districts, parks, health care facilities or other alcohol outlets. The planning commission will draft an ordinance and bring it back to the council for final approval. Supporters hope the rules will curb violence, public drunkenness and aggressive panhandling.

■ Renewed the annual city contract with the Santa Cruz County Conference & Visitors Council for tourism promotion. The city will pay \$343,814, the same as last year, for the non-profit agency to conduct visitor studies and promote Santa Cruz through advertisements and trade shows.