

Neighbors Team Up to Wipe Out Graffiti

by Michael Thomas

After Aptos firefighters responded to a recent medical emergency, they returned to find that their fire engine had been "tagged" it with graffiti. It was a frustrating example of just how bold some vandals have become in Mid-County neighborhoods. In Aptos and Soquel, businesses and residents have seen a steady increase in tagging around town, and they're intent on making a dent in the problem.

The incident with the fire truck comes after a mural on a Soquel Drive retaining wall was defaced with spray paint earlier in the year. The destruction was so extensive that the mural's creators decided to paint over a large portion of the artwork. A community meeting resulted in a reward program for tips leading to the arrest of the mural's vandals.

"It's getting kind of out of hand," said Karen Hibble of the Aptos Chamber of Commerce. "They are doing it not just on the freeways and trestles but also at the beach on rocks and pathways."

While the larger graffiti often appears in alleyways and secluded spots along the Union Pacific rail corridor, tags scrawled with markers or paint have become a nuisance all over town.

According to Doug Kaplan of Lomak Property Group, controlling graffiti on the 14 commercial buildings he manages is a constant challenge.

"Our objective is to remove the graffiti on the same day it's discovered. At a minimum it's once a week and usually more than that," he said.

Soquel Neighbors Take Initiative

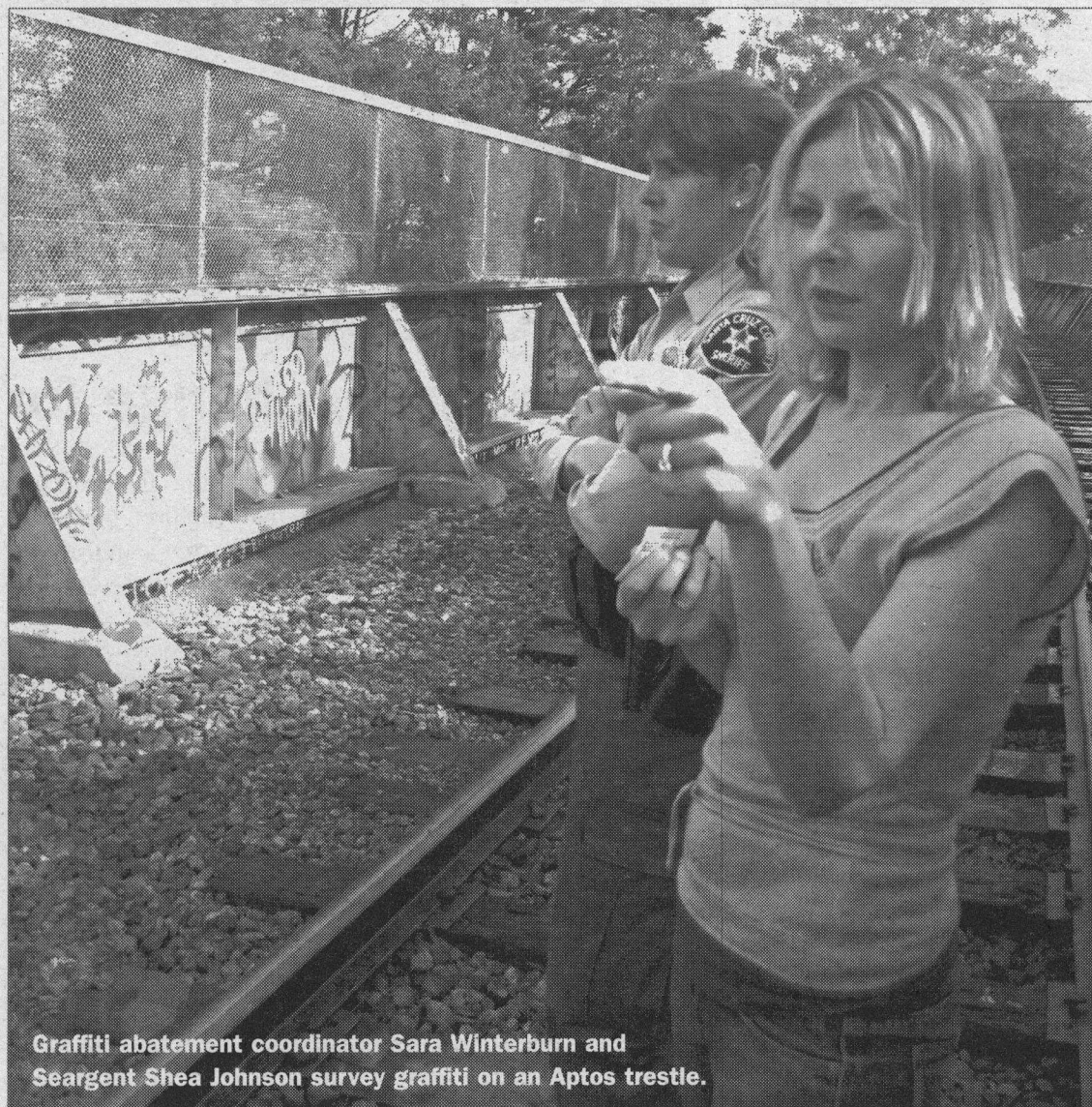
In Soquel, residents decid-

ed to fight back last month. A dozen members of the Soquel Neighbors Alliance teamed up to document 60 graffiti tags in and around the village. The

then we have a record of the other things they have tagged."

There are a couple key rules that govern the removal of graffiti in Santa Cruz County. Win-

munity say is a growing problem, and Sergeant Shea Johnson, who heads the Sheriff's Aptos Service Center, is taking the first steps.



Graffiti abatement coordinator Sara Winterburn and Sergeant Shea Johnson survey graffiti on an Aptos trestle.

county's abatement contractor, Bob Farmer, removed those tags but residents plan to start painting over graffiti themselves. They got supplies and some practical tips from the Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz County, which runs a Graffiti Removal Project.

"We assess what they are going to clean up and get them the necessary supplies: tarps, rollers, graffiti remover and cameras," explained Sara Winterburn, Program Coordinator for the Volunteer Centers' program. "We appreciate it if they [take pictures] so if the sheriff does get somebody,

terburn cautions would-be graffiti fighters to avoid bridges and retaining walls along creeks, where Fish and Game regulations prohibit applying paint — even to cover graffiti.

And you can't just paint over graffiti on someone else's property.

Under a County ordinance, the Sheriff's Department must first notify the property owner. If the owner doesn't reply, the Graffiti Project or the County's abatement contractor can go out and remove the eyesore.

Winterburn would like to see Aptos residents organize to combat what many in the com-

Tags Show Pattern of Gang Activity

On Feb. 16, Johnson and other deputies were supervising a group of County Jail inmates clearing heaps of trash from homeless encampments and vandal hangouts along the Union Pacific railroad tracks. The refuse was piled into a truck bound for the landfill, leaving graffiti covering the fences and walls along the tracks.

As Winterburn walked along the rail corridor with Johnson, she pointed out the tags of various known gangs. Though she is a mother with two small children, Winterburn's seven years

of experience with graffiti abatement have left her surprisingly fluent in the language of tags.

Amid the jumble of paint and marker scrawl, she points out the signatures of a half dozen known gangs and can tell you where each one is from.

"Once you know this stuff, you see it all over the County," she said.

She points out one tag whose creator is currently in jail, but the same tag keeps appearing, presumably the work of the vandal's friends.

"Taggers are extremely difficult to catch," Sergeant Johnson says. "Sometimes it's [done] in broad daylight but you're not there to catch them."

However, she thinks graffiti could be cleared up if residents take initiative and work together with resources such as the Volunteer Centers program.

"They really rely on community involvement," Johnson says.

And when neighbors become involved, the challenge takes on personal significance. People become vigilant and report suspects so that deputies can step in to make arrests.

Some residents have already gotten involved. A husband and wife team in Rio Del Mar and another in Aptos were recently honored for their hands-on efforts to keep graffiti out of their neighborhoods.

Businesses can do their part too. Last summer, a tip from Union Pacific employees led to the arrest of two juveniles along this same stretch of tracks. The paint was still wet on their fingers. If you're ever suspicious that someone has been tagging, overspray on the index finger is a dead giveaway.

Rewards Offered for Tips

Though taggers can be a sneaky group to pin down,

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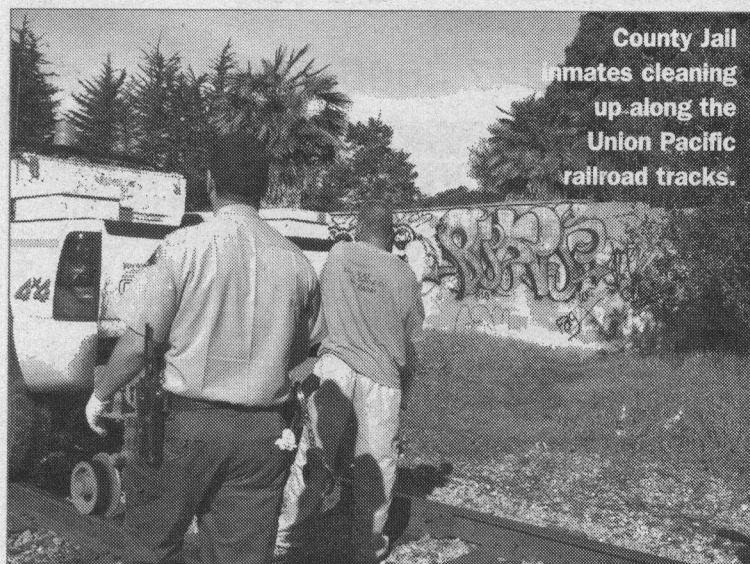
Hibble is sure that their exploits are common knowledge in some circles, particularly when the target is something high profile, like the mural on Soquel Drive.

"A lot of people know who did it and one of them may

and cover it with wax again."

Can Designated Painting Walls Help?

Though graffiti is viewed as a perennial nuisance by most people, it does come in different forms — from haphazard, territorial markings to sculpted, intertwined letters that some young people pursue as



County Jail inmates cleaning up along the Union Pacific railroad tracks.

decide they don't approve of it," she said.

To that end, community members at a recent Chamber meeting agreed to establish a reward fund for tips. Coast Commercial Bank donated \$500 to get the fund started, and \$250 is being offered to anyone who provides information leading to the arrest of the vandals who defaced the mural.

In the meantime, art teacher Kimberly Hardin is getting ready to repaint the mural with her students. The Volunteer Centers will be providing them with paint and supplies.

The problem is that graffiti often reappears over and over again once a prominent target has been identified. Hibble noted one Aptos restaurant that has been tagged at least eight times in the past year.

Winterburn said there are ways to protect high-visibility surfaces from being damaged again.

"We found a spray-on wax [for graffiti prevention,]" she said. "If they get tagged again you just pressure wash it off

an artistic outlet. Recognizing that potential, some communities have sought to strike a balance by offering designated walls for spray painting.

"I know they've done that down in Huntington Beach," Hibble said. "I don't know whether or not it has cut down on graffiti in other areas."

Sergeant Johnson offered guarded support for the strategy.

"I'd like to think that if we had some more creative outlets like a mural where they could paint [it would help]. But graffiti is not art," she said.

For Winterburn, the key distinction is whether the graffiti includes gang markings. As long as that influence is kept at bay, she thinks it's worth a shot. One business owner near the railroad tracks at 17th Avenue has volunteered the use of a wall that was already the target of vandals' graffiti.

"We are going to paint over it and give them a clean slate," Winterburn said, adding that an Aptos location may be set up as well. "We have to capture those kids and give them an

outlet," she said.

The designated painting wall comes as Winterburn aims to wipe out graffiti elsewhere in the same neighborhood. She has organized a big painting day in cooperation with iD Tech Camps of Campbell.

On Saturday, Feb. 24, she expects about 40 employees of the summer camp organization to gather with friends and family and wipe out graffiti in the neighborhood of Shoreline Middle School in Live Oak.

In the meantime, a commu-

nity effort like the one in Soquel appears to be brewing in Aptos. Residents who are keen on keeping their neighborhood free of taggers' scribbles are encouraged to contact the Volunteer Centers' graffiti hotline at 831-427-0462. ■

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