

Crime & Criminals - Graffiti Graffiti ordinances get final OK; laws go into effect in 30 days

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Watsonville City Council last night gave final approval to ordinances that would place restrictions on the sale of graffiti-related materials and would make the city primarily responsible for removing graffiti from public and private property.

One ordinance would require property owners to contact the city within seven days after being hit by graffiti. The city would then remove the graffiti using either city workers or contracting a

painter. This service would be done at no direct cost to property owners.

If property owners do not notify the city within seven days, however, the graffiti would be considered a public nuisance and the city would remove the graffiti. The property owner would then be billed directly for the cost of the service.

The second ordinance would require merchants to place materials, such as large-tip markers and cans of spray paint, in locked areas or somewhere inaccessible to customers.

These two ordinances will go into effect in 30 days. If merchants need more time to relocate the graffiti-related materials, they will be given an extension, city officials said.

It is estimated that the anti-graffiti program will cost the city about \$32,000 a year.

Councilman Tony Campos wanted to know what could be done to "put more teeth" in the ordinances. He suggested that council members and the public put pressure on the courts to hand down more severe punishments for those convicted of vandalism.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said the courts are well aware the public is concerned about the graffiti problem. He said a convicted graffiti vandal yesterday finished a five-day sentence of washing Watsonville police cars. Police officers are making more graffiti-related arrests than ever, Medina said, but once the arrests are made the cases are essentially out of their hands and the court system takes over.

Campos suggested that the courts impose heavy fines for graffiti-related offenses in order to "make it hurt." Graffiti, he said,

has frustrated the community. "The people of Watsonville are sick and tired of this," Campos said.

Mayor Lowell Hurst said the ordinances are not a "complete panacea," but they are a way of fighting the problem. He considered the plan "well-balanced."

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The ordinances carry a component that requires parents of minors convicted of vandalism to make restitution to the victims. It also includes provisions for prevention and education; for example, involving youths in creative outlets such as mural painting and art classes.