

# Watsonville graffiti cuts into city's budget, image

Crime and Criminology - Graffiti 12-13-08

By DONNA JONES

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — A few quick swipes of Rex Rackley's long-handled paint roller Friday afternoon and the name scrawled across the side of a building on Main Street was gone.

Trouble is it probably took the vandal just a few seconds to tag the downtown building in the first place, and Rackley knows from experience the tagger likely will return.

For more than six years, Rackley's been patrolling the streets of Watsonville in a box van tricked out as a paint workshop to tackle the Sisyphean task of graffiti removal.

"I paint 15 places in a day, and I drive by the next day and every one is tagged again," Rackley said.

Rackley, who sports a brush of gray-streaked hair and a blue paint-spattered jacket with city of Watsonville



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Rex Rackley paints over some graffiti in Watsonville on Friday.

See **GRAFFITI** on **PAGE A7**

Saturday, December 13, 2008 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL **A-7**

## Graffiti

Continued from Page A1

insignia, is the Public Works Department's graffiti removal coordinator. He said he averages 140 work orders a month, but he'd picked up close to 100 assignments before the close of the first two weeks of December.

The tags are everywhere, from telephone poles to fences to whole alleys, Rackley said. The latest target is homes vacant due to foreclosure.

He blames tagging crews out "to get props, to get famous" for most of the vandalism. Gang tags account for about 25 percent, he said. It all adds up to tens of thousands of dollars in property damage each year. He estimated the cost of the city's cleanup effort alone at more than \$100,000.

Rackley doesn't just paint over the tags and move on. He takes photos, and logs them into a computer along with the date, place and cleanup cost. That way the city can try to recover expenses if the tagger is caught.

The city is seeking more than \$12,000 in restitution from 22-year-old Juan Hernandez of Watsonville, whom police arrested Wednesday on suspicion of felony vandalism. Police allege

Hernandez had been painting "Tuk" and "Haze" all over town. Rackley had received 210 assignments to cover the two tags since March.

Jerry Beyersdorff, president and chief executive officer of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture, said beyond the expense of removing graffiti is the cost to the city's image. He said he doesn't understand why it's called tagging.

"It's malicious mischief, defacing a property," Beyersdorff said. "It has a tremendously negative impact on a community. It's not funny and it's not art."

Watsonville police Lt. Darren Thompson said officers get a couple of calls a month from people witnessing taggers in action.

"If people take the time to call us and then stay in the area until officers arrive, it gives us a huge advantage in case the person finishes their work and heads down a particular street," he said.

Rackley said he could use some help, too. As one person he can only cover so much territory, but he can provide supplies and tips to anyone willing to lend a hand. He can be reached through city Public Works at 768-3100.

Contact Donna Jones at 763-4505 or [djones@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:djones@santacruzsentinel.com).