

Watsonville merchants critical of graffiti laws

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Merchants say the city's month-old graffiti laws are costing them too much money and will not prevent vandals from damaging property.

Required to restrict customer access to spray paint and types of marking pens, some store owners have spent more than \$1,000 on glass cases to lock up such items.

"We are against the graffiti spray paint ordinances because they don't work — the mentality is that flies cause garbage," said Maynard Jenkins, president and CEO of Orchard Supply Hardware.

Watsonville leaders are banking \$25,000 this year that tougher laws — including quick graffiti removal, stronger law enforcement and neighborhood clean-up programs — will erase graffiti. But progress may be slow.

"I don't know if we could say we've had a real impact at this moment," said Wayne Green, in charge of enforcing similar graffiti laws in San Jose that have been on the books for the past year. Green estimates it will take a couple of years before progress is apparent.

In Watsonville, 70 cases of graffiti have been reported since March, and police say the actual number is likely twice that.

Like other Watsonville stores that sell spray paint and wide markers OSH, located in the Crossroads shopping center, has spent \$1,500 on glass cases to prevent "graffiti tools" from being stolen, police say.

"You penalize 99.5 percent of population to buy something (the glass cases) for the .5 percent that would spray a building," said Jenkins.

Please see GRAFFITI — A2

REFEREN

Graffiti

Continued from Page A1

Such ordinances affect 20 of 54 Orchard Supply stores. Glass cases make buying a can of paint a hassle, and have caused sales to drop 20 percent, Jenkins said.

Although San Jose merchants saw an initial decline in paint and pen sales, they are seeing purchases increase again, said Green.

Watsonville's graffiti ordinance, which went into effect June 10, caused Ace Hardware store co-owner Manuel Rodrigues to discontinue a cheaper line of spray paint in both of his Watsonville stores. He said he hopes the \$1,485 he spent on glass cases will be recouped by offering only \$2.99 cans, instead of the 99 cent and \$1.69 varieties.

Likewise, Orchard Supply Hardware could stop selling wide-tipped markers in Watsonville, as it did in San Jose after a similar graffiti ordinance went into effect nearly one year ago.

Jenkins and other merchants said the incidents of shoplifting pens and spray paint cans are insignificant and don't contribute greatly to the graffiti problem, which law enforcement officials say stems from gang members marking their territory or from "taggers" getting attention by putting their signatures in hard-to-reach areas.

Rather than give up their habits, merchants say, graffiti vandals simply will travel to neighboring Freedom, an unincorporated area that in some places is across the street from city borders, or to nearby cities like Santa Cruz.

"From what I've heard, it hasn't worked. (Minors) can still get it. It's just like alcohol — you get people to buy it," Rodrigues said.

Rodrigues and others say toughening punishment for those caught vandalizing property is the answer.

"If you go back to alcohol, look at what they've done to drunk drivers. They've made (drunken driving) a crime. Law enforcement needs to be a lot stiffer," said Rodrigues, who let two youths go after catching them stealing spray paint because police officers "would have given them a ticket and let them walk home."

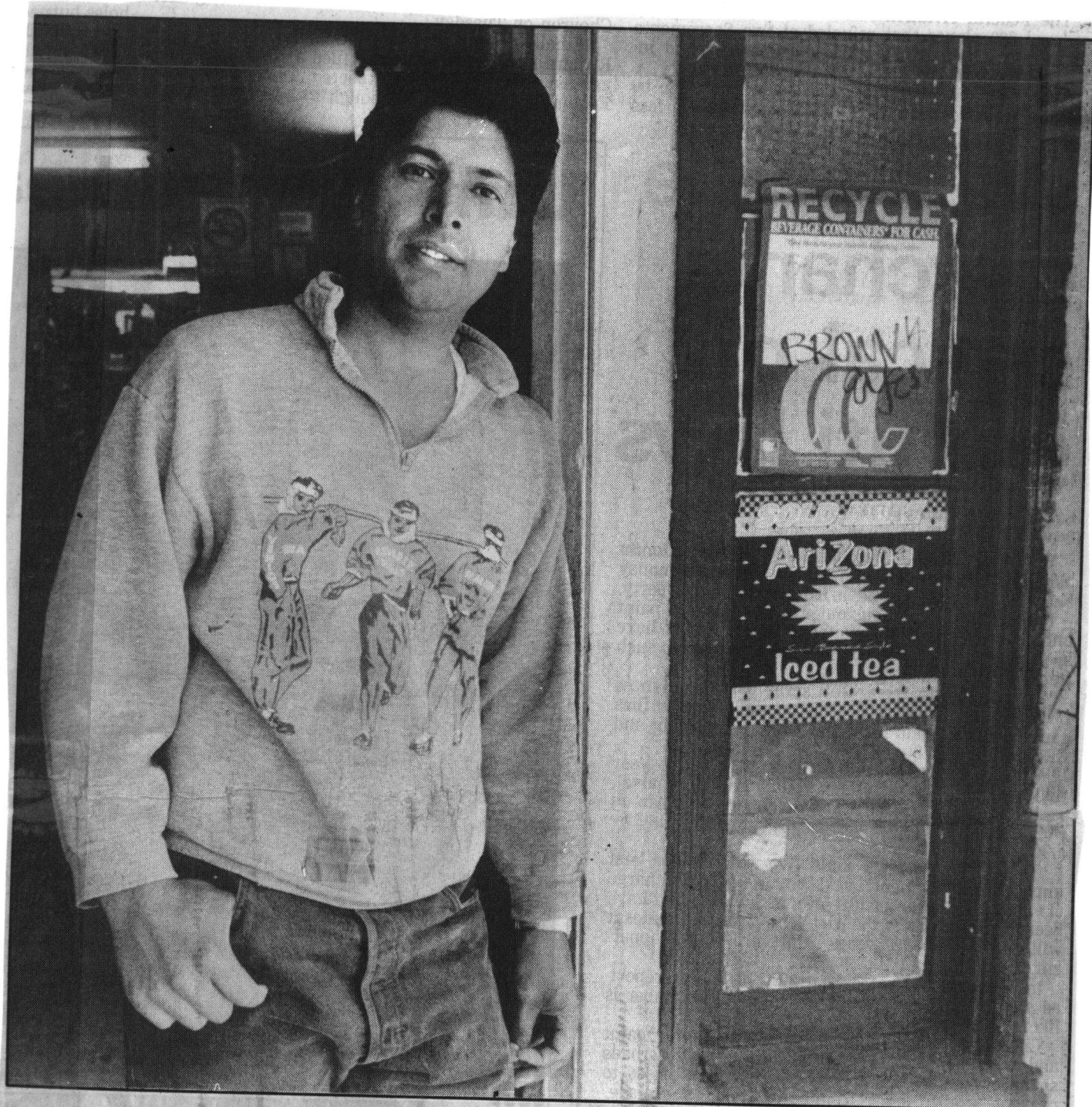
Moreover, some store owners are critical of another part of the ordinance that requires them to report graffiti damage within one week of its discovery.

"They're (city officials) giving me a hard time. They already wrote me a warning saying I have graffiti on my building. I touched it up, but it shows through," said Mario Barajas of La

Tiendita restaurant. He forwarded to the property owner a paper he must sign before the graffiti is painted over by the city, which says it isn't responsible if the color doesn't match.

The city is receiving about 10 calls a

day from business owners and another 15 from a student intern hired to track down graffiti. City officials expected those numbers, said Nancy Reutlinger, who heads the graffiti program for Watsonville.



Mario Barajas of La Tiendita restaurant questions the value of Watsonville's graffiti ordinances. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel