

City prepares for advent of graffiti curbs

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STAFF WRITER

The Watsonville City Council last night approved the first reading of a package of graffiti abatement ordinances aimed at removing graffiti and restricting the sale of materials used to create graffiti.

The first ordinance would give property owners seven days to either remove graffiti from their property or allow the city to do so. The service would not cost the owners. City workers or a private company would remove the graffiti.

If the property owners do not remove the graffiti or give the city permission to do the job, the graffiti would be considered a public nuisance and the city would remove it and bill the owner. The property owner could appeal this action to the council, but if the appeal is denied, the city would then direct city employees or the private contractor to remove the graffiti.

The cost to the city of the graffiti-removal plan is estimated to be about \$32,000. That money would come from the city's solid waste-collection budget. City officials had discussed increasing solid-waste fees from \$3 to \$5 a year, but decided against it. No fee increases are included in the ordi-

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— Bob Dwyer, PV

Chamber of Commerce

nances.

The second ordinance restricts the sale of large-tipped markers and spray paints. Merchants would have to keep the materials locked up or in an area inaccessible to customers. Merchants could use other methods of restricting the accessibility of the materials, such as placing magnetic strips on the materials that would sound an alarm if someone were to attempt shoplifting them.

In addition, merchants will be required to display a notice near the materials that informs the public that graffiti is a crime and punishable by imprisonment of up to six months and/or a \$1,000 fine. Employees are to also be informed that selling graffiti-related materials to minors is a crime, also punishable by up to six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

The City Council is expected to

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✓ CF graffiti EP APR 27 1994

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vote again on these two ordinances at its next meeting, which is May 10. At that time, the council could give the ordinances final approval. It would take about 30 days for the ordinances to go into effect after the council gives its final approval.

The graffiti-removal ordinance includes a provision for restitution. Anyone convicted of defacing property would be required to pay for damages. Minors' parents would be responsible for paying for damage to property.

Prevention and education are two other items included. The city is working on publishing a brochure on graffiti prevention and removal. Copies of the brochure will be passed out to the public.

The city plans to sponsor art classes for at-risk youths. Mural paintings for youth are planned, as well as neighborhood graffiti clean ups. At-risk youth involved in anti-crime programs such as BASTA would also be involved in graffiti clean ups. The city also plans to step up patrolling of city streets and more strictly enforcing the city's midnight curfew law.

The graffiti-removal ordinance given the OK last night was actually a revised version of an ordinance introduced about two

months ago. The original ordinance also gave property owners seven days to remove graffiti, but placed the cost of the cleanup on the property owners. Many business people and community members said that ordinance made them victims twice, once by vandals, a second time by the city's law.

After a couple of public meetings and working closely with several members of the community, members of the city's Graffiti Abatement Committee came up with the revised graffiti ordinance.

Mayor Lowell Hurst said of the city's effort to clean up graffiti, "It may not be perfect, it may need revision," but at least it's heading in the right direction and he expressed hopes it will make a "dent" in Watsonville's graffiti problem.

Councilman Oscar Rios pointed to social conditions as contributing factors affecting society, in particular youth. He said, "We have to look at the big picture of what's going on."

Bob Dwyer, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce, thanked the city for working hard on developing the graffiti ordinances.

"Graffiti gives the impression that our community is less than prideful," Dwyer said. That, however, is not true of Watsonville, he said.

Dwyer called the ordinances "creative and excellent."

But Ray Amrhein was not as pleased. Amrhein, who lives near Corralitos but works in Watsonville, said the city already has a graffiti ordinance and a curfew law and the problem of graffiti still exists.

"None of (these laws) work and now you want to pass more," Amrhein said.

It's the "law-abiding citizen" that is the victim, Amrhein said, adding that the ordinances will "penalize" residents and business people.

"Who do you think is going to pay for this?" Amrhein said.

Mayor Hurst said Amrhein points were well taken, "but the public demands action."

Roxanne Davilla, who owns a business in Watsonville, said she doesn't like to be "regulated" but approved of the ordinances, because they will help clean up the city. She said she is tired of seeing graffiti, which she believes makes the city appear as if it had no "community pride."

One audience member suggested caning may be a better punishment for graffiti offenders, a reference to the American youth sentenced to caning in Singapore for vandalizing property.

He also suggested people convicted of stealing should have their fingers cut off.