

Local

SC council endorses anti-graffiti measure

Law would require businesses, property owners to clean up

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SANTA CRUZ — A tough law aimed at getting property owners and businesses to clean up graffiti was strongly endorsed by the City Council Tuesday.

"This tries to make the entire community responsible for the problem," said Councilman Mike Rotkin.

The proposed city ordinance would make it illegal for property owners to allow graffiti to remain on their property.

It would also prohibit stores from keeping spray paint and large indelible markers on shelves where customers could get at them without staff's help.

Property owners who don't comply with the ordinance could face stiff penalties — ranging from a \$250 fine to having the city foreclose on their land.

Vandals, when caught, would pay for cleaning up the damage they've done. If they are minors, the law would hold parents or legal guardians liable for the costs.

"This kind of effort is extremely needed," said Dan Erhler, CEO of the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce. "(Graffiti) is escalating, the damage that's done is incredible. We need to do something very strongly in sending a message that that's not going to be tolerated."

In the last six months, graffiti damage and juvenile arrests have been on the rise around the county.

Last month in Santa Cruz, three juveniles were arrested on suspicion of spray painting and etching the windows of 21 businesses downtown, police said. The trio, who are scheduled to be sentenced Monday, inflicted damage "well in excess" of \$10,000, police said.

"We need the authority to eliminate the blight," Police Chief Jack Bassett said.

Under the ordinance, graffiti would be declared a nuisance and a "visual blight" that is fought most effectively by quickly removing it.

Businesses and property owners hit by graffiti would be given three days to clean up the damage. If they won't or can't, the city would come in and do it for them.

In the case of absentee landlords or buildings that are chronic problems, the city police chief has the authority to give the owner 10 days to clean it up or charge the owner the city's costs for removing the problem.

If the owner doesn't pay up, the city reserves the right to assess the costs on his property taxes, or, in extreme cases, place a lien on the property.

Violations of the law will be an infraction, punishable by a maximum \$250 fine. Three violations in one year bump the crime to a misdemeanor.

"Knowing and willful" violation will also be charged as a misdemeanor.

Jack Collier, who organizes a volunteer group to paint over graffiti in Santa Cruz, said he liked the



Dan Coyo/Sentinel

Owners of graffiti-tagged buildings like this one in Santa Cruz would have to clean up their property under new law.

tough line the ordinance takes.

"We need something to cause businesses to clean up graffiti on their own buildings," he said. With the new wave of vandals etching glass, he said, "We're talking major vandalism."

The county's Graffiti Task Force has been working to get cities and the county to coordinate their de-

fense against vandalism. Jesse Gonzalez, an 18-year-old Watsonville resident, was recently hired as coordinator to work with businesses on cleaning up graffiti.

Capitola is already running an abatement program, which Councilman Louis Rittenhouse said has been successful in getting businesses to comply.

The county is considering its own ordinance, modeled on the Santa Cruz draft, but has postponed its final vote until mid-August.

How the ordinance will be enforced once it is adopted is still being worked out, Bassett said.

The power of cities to enact anti-

graffiti measures was bolstered by a recent state Supreme Court decision that upheld a Los Angeles ordinance restricting the display of paints and markers. State law already prohibits the sale of spray paint to minors.

Santa Cruz's ordinance will come back to the council for formal adoption in September.