

War against graffiti crosses city limits

By DONNA KIMURA
and ROBERTO ROBLEDLO
Sentinel staff writers

Armed with new brushes and a bucket of red paint, volunteers around the county kicked off a new graffiti-removal project Monday.

Santa Cruz County Supervisors Jan Beautz and Mardi Wormhoudt were among the local notables helping paint over the "tags" defacing the Wild Horse Woodworks building near Soquel Drive and 41st Avenue.

"The most effective thing you can do to discourage graffiti is frustrate taggers," Wormhoudt said.

The way to discourage taggers, vandals who paint an identifying name or design, is remove the tag within 24 hours, she said.

The Great Graffiti Cover-Up, a pilot program of the Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz County, aims to remove graffiti from property in the unincorporated areas of

Santa Cruz County.

The Volunteer Centers, a local non-profit agency that coordinates more than 2,000 community volunteers, hope to register 100 new volunteers by April 25.

The county has committed about \$36,000 to launch the effort.

Two hotlines have been established to encourage people to report graffiti. People may call the hotlines to ask a crew to paint over graffiti or to volunteer for the project.

The first cover-up took place Monday in Soquel and Aptos. The next paint-off will be Feb. 11. Freedom Boulevard outside Watsonville will be one of the target areas.

The supervisors were joined by Rudy Carino, superintendent of Live Oak School District; Nathan Cross, principal of Del Mar Middle School; and students from Del Mar's YouthSERVE program.

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Kelly Brook of San Lorenzo Valley Junior High does her part to paint over graffiti on a 41st Avenue building Monday.

Graffiti battle widens

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A project of the Volunteer Centers, YouthSERVE ties the classroom curriculum of middle school students to community projects.

The volunteers helped paint brick-color paint over "Mosco 13," "HC" and other tags dominating the exterior of the Wild Horse building.

The county receives numerous complaints about graffiti, Supervisor Beautz said.

"It's a real assault on businesses," she said.

Two unincorporated areas in Pajaro Valley also will be early targets of the county's graffiti cleanup project.

Businesses and private properties along Freedom Boulevard and the vicinity of Pinto Lake park have been regular targets of graffiti vandals, officials say.

Nancy Reutlinger, who oversees the city of Watsonville's graffiti removal program, said she welcomes the county's new program. It should address the outlying areas the city can't get to, she said.

The city of Watsonville began a graffiti removal program last June. It tackles graffiti problems within

the city limits.

A painting contractor was hired and dispatched to cleanup jobs called in by residents.

A review of the first 4½ months of the program indicates that it is doing its job, Reutlinger said.

One reason: a "quick and dirty" approach to the problem. Painters clean up graffiti within 24 hours from the time reports are called in, she said.

Police surveillance of graffiti problem areas have also helped to take spray cans out of the hands of vandals, Reutlinger said.

Lt. Mickey Aluffi of the Watsonville Police Department said one person has been arrested on graffiti charges since June. He said that there have been 23 other arrests for malicious mischief, and that some of those could be related to graffiti "tags."

Aluffi said Watsonville police are setting up a system that would send convicted graffiti vandals back into the community on cleanup duty.

"I think the town looks great," said Wendy Griffin, a city worker who has fielded hundreds of calls on the graffiti hotline.

Recent storms have cut down the number of graffiti jobs and the incidence of vandalism.

From June to October, the city acted on 288 requests for graffiti removal, Reutlinger said. The work amounted to 800 hours of labor at \$35 an hour, or a bill of \$28,000.

The cost includes paint and materials, Reutlinger said.

Watsonville is 85 percent cleaner than it was," said Pete Violich, who has operated Pete's Painting Service for 28 years.

He said some of the city's alleys continue to be graffiti-scarred but "Main Street looks pretty clean. I hope it stays that way."

Two city ordinances have focused on graffiti. One requires stores that sell paint and felt markers to keep those items locked away or in a display case. The second ordinance requires a property owner to remove any graffiti on the premises or to call to have the city do it.

The county graffiti hotlines are 427-0462 for the north county and 722-7771 for the south county. Watsonville's hotline number is 763-4040.