

Graffiti law targets vandals, parents

By CHUCK HILDEBRAND
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Minors convicted of graffiti vandalism soon can expect to work as part of their punishment — and so can their parents.

A bill signed into law Thursday by Gov. Pete Wilson requires that graffiti vandals under the age of 18 perform at least 24 hours of community cleanup. Their parents will have to work at least half the sentence alongside their children.

The new law was praised by those involved with graffiti-abatement efforts in Santa Cruz County.

It passed 74-0 in the state Assembly and 28-1 in the Senate, with only Tom Hayden, the former anti-Vietnam War activist, voting against it.

"Too often parents look the other way when they should notice the signs of a child involved in crimes," said Assemblyman Tom Connolly, D-Lemon Grove, author of the bill. "Now they will have more incentive to ask questions about paint on their child's hands."

"It was a slam dunk," said a spokesman for Assemblyman Bruce McPherson, R-Santa Cruz.

When the law takes effect Jan. 1, it should discourage children from defacing property and make parents more vigilant, say law-enforcement officials, educators and others in the fight-against graffiti.

Watsonville this year enacted an ordinance that fines parents of under-18 graffiti vandals to pay for damage. It also requires that graffiti be painted

'I think (parents) will start paying a little more attention.'

— Terry Medina, Watsonville police chief

over within seven days — a painting contractor was hired to do it for free if the victim so desires — and forces merchants who sell spray paint and wide markers to keep them behind counters under lock and key.

Nancy Reutlinger, who works in the city utilities department and is overseeing Watsonville's anti-graffiti effort, says the city is making progress toward wiping out its graffiti problem. The new law, she says, is a bonus.

"If a judge sentences a (graffiti vandal) to community cleanup, it might not be graffiti cleanup because we think we're getting ahead on that," she said. "But as far as things like (cleaning up) litter are concerned, it sounds good."

"Anything that gets the parents involved with the problem would be a good thing. Both the parent and the offender would see how their actions impact other people."

Law enforcement officials also like the idea.

"Cool," said Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, who like most people interviewed Thursday on the subject, had not heard about the legislation before. "I think (parents) will start paying a little more attention. It's a means to get them a lot more involved."

Educators, who often bemoan the fact some parents are only peripherally involved in the lives of their children, said that forcing parents to share their kids' punishment could be a positive step.

"There's no real clear-cut standards," said Bruce Kint, assistant principal at San Lorenzo Valley High in Felton. "The kids don't see anything happening to them if they do something."

"That (the new law) is going to be real interesting. When parents have to pay for their kids' vandalism, it's a case where the parents (receive) all the punishment and the kid does none. This has to be better because it's punishing them both. You just don't go out and spank the kid and whip out the checkbook."

"Parents are the first teachers," said Lorraine Sandoval-Vigil, principal at Watsonville High, "and they should be involved in every learning experience their kids have, whether it's positive or negative."

"A lot of parents feel powerless, like (writing a check to cover damages) is all they can do. I think some parents may even welcome a program like this (because it could help strengthen bonds between parents and their children)."