Painting a Picture of Graffiti Vandalism

Crime + Criminals - Graffiti

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by Judith Wellner

We've all seen hundreds of graffiti tags on walls, sidewalks, fences, storefronts and cars. But when we look at the tags, we don't necessarily think about why any-

one would want to spray-paint their logos all over town, how much damage they cause, how much it costs the city, county and private owners to remove the tags, and how much effort goes

into the prevention of graffiti vandalism.

"It's an ongoing issue," says Sgt. Robin Mitchell from the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office. "Graffiti removal costs millions of dollars a year. Tagging does nothing other than damage property."

Mitchell has been focusing on graffiti vandalism cases since January 2009. She feels it is very important to point out that the vast majority of graffiti that the city and county deal with has absolutely nothing to do with art.

"These cases of graffiti vandalism lack any artistic overtones," she says. "It's a self-serving crime. There is no design, no colors. It's all about getting their names up."

According to Mitchell, there are three key motivations that drive taggers. They are either ignited by an adrenalin rush, want to make a reputation within the tagger community, or want to act out anarchy.

"Even if it did have any artistic value, once you destroy others' property it is not art," says Mitchell.

Paul Martin, a volunteer who has been working with the Graffiti Free Santa Cruz project and has been helping with tag removal for 12 years adds that "the key factor is that the taggers have no consent from the people whose property they paint on. It's just plain vandalism."

"And let's not forget that graffiti vandalism is a felony," adds Rick Martinez, deputy chief for the city of Santa Cruz.

An Ongoing Problem

Graffiti has again been in the news during the last couple of months.

In late April, just a week before the May Day vandalism that occurred in downtown Santa Cruz and left many buildings with graffiti tags and broken windows, two taggers – the 19 year-old Edgar Gustavo Coronel and another 19 year-old Christopher Julian Boyd Henry — were arrested.

Law enforcement continues to add incidents to the charges against the two teens, said Mitchell, which in both cases number more than 200 at locations across the county.

Assistant DA Jason Gill said Henry has been formally charged with 10 counts of felony vandalism, including tagging on Coastlands and Twin Lakes church properties. He is next scheduled to appear in court July 2, with a preliminary trial July 6 in front of Judge Paul Marigonda.
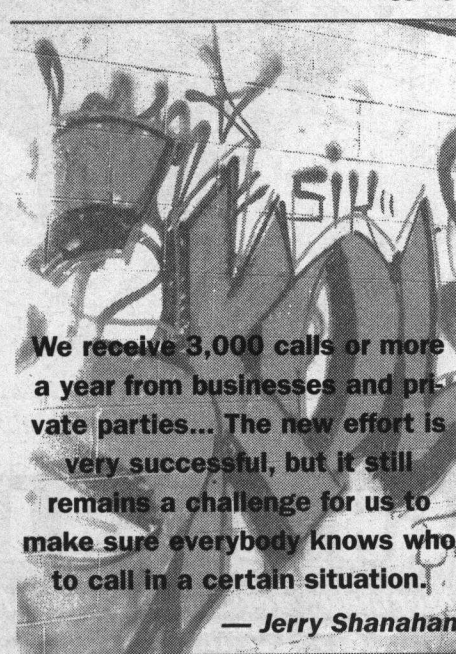
Coronel's preliminary trail, in the same court, is scheduled for June 21.

Gill said the District Attorney's Office policy is to ask for jail time in any felony vandalism case. In addition, convicted taggers must spend a year working on graffiti abatement in which they are assigned a specific area to clean and maintain. They will also be held responsible to pay for any damages.

Both young men pleaded not guilty to the charges.

In the meantime another tagging

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incident occurred in the late evening/early morning hours of May 18 and May 19 in Santa Cruz.

According to Martinez, most of the tags are clearly from the same few offenders who have been known in the area for a long time.

"The May Day incident is different," he adds. "Those were some serious extremist groups. We don't have many of those in the Santa Cruz area."

Home-grown taggers present a different challenge to police.

"Graffiti with a message [to the public and not just to other taggers] is a different issue," says Julie Hendee, Redevelopment manager for the city of Santa Cruz.

Hopes for a Graffiti-free Santa Cruz

According to Mitchell, there have been efforts in the past in different cities, such as Venice Beach and San Francisco, as well as other countries including Canada, to legalize graffiti – to create walls where graffiti would be legal.

"It didn't work," she says. "The taggers didn't just use the walls; they ended up painting all over the neighborhood."

While graffiti vandalism has been an ongoing issue in Santa Cruz County, some recent efforts might bring a break-through in the prevention of tagging.

Following the vision of District Attorney Bob Lee, a countywide graffiti task force was set up a year ago to facilitate communication of graffiti vandalism investigations between not only law enforcement agencies, but also with graffiti removal programs, public works departments and private citizens.

"The collaboration makes a huge difference," says Santa Cruz' Hendee. "We are thrilled with the latest arrests."

According to Hendee, the Redevelopment Agency has received over 1,200 phone calls reporting graffiti tags since July 2009.

"We receive 3,000 calls or more a year from businesses and private parties," says Jerry Shanahan, program manager of the Graffiti Removal Project. "The new effort is very successful, but it still remains a challenge for us to make sure everybody knows who to call in a certain situation."

Mitchell emphasizes that the collaborative task force was set up because the community felt it was time to do something.

"I go to a Neighborhood Watch meeting once a week," she says. "People are fed up."

Martin also got involved in the removal efforts because he felt personally responsible for his neighborhood.

"I live very close to a trouble spot," he says. "At some point, I just felt I had to hold my ground and do something about it."

Martin's theory that a consistent removal effort will drive taggers back to their favorite locations where they will eventually be caught seems to be correct.

The collaboration involves taking pictures of tagged sites, sending out emails to the involved city and community groups and then checking in with each group to coordinate the information.

"Through this new system, we are able to write the case, document the graffiti and tie the cases together," says Sgt. Paul Ramos from the Sheriff's Office, assigned to Cabrillo College.

Removal — Cost and Effect

Because of the high cost of graffiti removal, properties very rarely get restored to their original form.

According to Mitchell, the removal of a smaller individual tag is about $50 to $75, while bigger tags cost about $100 to $150 each.

"Five gallons of paint is about $250," adds Mitchell. "And then there's also the cost of driving there, the tools used for the removal, mixing the paint."

After the May Day incident, the city's graffiti removal team was there the next morning.

"It was the kind of thing when you just had to drop what you were doing and deal with it right away," says Hendee.

Another participant of the task force, the Graffiti Removal Project organizes "Adopt a Block" programs.

"Volunteers sign up, we deliver the supplies, and they agree to remove graffiti in a certain area for a certain amount of time – for a week, or month, for instance," says Shanahan.

Doing Penance

Some of the graffiti is removed by former graffiti taggers. The Graffiti Removal Project is working with the Probation Department to assign offenders to various graffiti removal projects.

"It's their community work," says Shanahan. "They have to sign up for 100 to 200 hours of work; we assign a certain removal job and then check on those sites to see if the work is done. Then we report back to the Sheriff's Office."

Former taggers chose not to be interviewed. However, according to Shanahan, many of them change their behavior after their community work. This is supported by several blog posts on anti-graffiti websites, such as nograffiti.com.

"It is very important to report cases," says Mitchell. "Take photos of the graffiti, don't clean it up; just call law enforcement."

According to Hendee, there are two major ways citizens can help fight graffiti vandalism.

"It is very important that people report it when they see tagging," she says. "People can also volunteer and help with the removal.

To report graffiti vandalism, you can call the Redevelopment Agency's Hotline at 831-420-5303. You can also call any law enforcement group, such as the Sheriff's Office at 831-662-0690.

If you are in unincorporated Santa Cruz County, you can call the Graffiti Removal Program Hotline at 831-427-0462. You can also contact the Graffiti Removal Project, or Graffiti Free Santa Cruz at 831- 420-5303. ∎