

Watsonville authorities on alert for youth gangs

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WATSONVILLE — School officials, community leaders and police are gearing up to revive a Youth Gang Violence Reduction Committee in hopes of stemming the rise of youth gangs in south county. Five years ago the Watsonville and North Monterey County areas were peppered by violence from a mini-war between two youth gangs, the North Side Locos and Las Lomas Boys. Several teen-agers were shot at and numerous fights were reported, culminating in the slaying deaths of two 14-year-olds, the Lomas Boys on Mount Madonna. Their killers were convicted of murder five years ago, almost to the day. In the past four to five years, relative peace has prevailed in town. Most of the violent criminals were sent to prison or California Youth Authority for long terms. Activities have been initiated to keep young kids out of trouble and an aggressive drug and alcohol intervention pro-

gram has been pursued in the schools.

Some of those programs grew out of the youth gang committee that has since disbanded, says Recreation Services Manager Jack Smith. The time has come to revive the committee, he added.

Monthly meetings are going to start soon, with various service and counseling groups, including the schools, Youth Services, the YMCA, YWCA and Pajaritos (a part of Fenix Alcohol Services), he said.

Recently, school officials have noticed a resurgence of youth groups forming, especially among freshmen bilingual students who are "relatively new to the community ... and in transition," said Watsonville High School principal Tony Calvo.

He said he knows of four groups of 25 to 50 young people. "We're talking large groups of kids," Calvo said.

Calvo said the groups are expressing themselves through graffiti. While there's no "serious crime or hard-core gang behavior occurring yet," Calvo told the City Council



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Watsonville authorities are watching graffiti for signs of youth-gang activity.

recently, "... weel there is some potential to movin that direction."

Calvo and otrs are anxious to keep a lid onle situation. They

called on the council to support their efforts to revive the Youth Gang Violence Reduction Committee and
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to provide more activities for area youth. And Calvo said he's going to need a full-time counselor in the school to address the problem.

"It's primarily not a law enforcement problem," said Calvo. "But it's a problem that has the potential for having some serious consequences down the road. These students have some fine leadership skills that need to be channelled into activities other than gang activity."

The most visible sign of the brewing problem is graffiti, which has been cropping up everywhere. Spray-painted signs of "NSW," for North Side Watson, "PS," for Poor Side and "CH" for City Hall groups can be found on trash cans, fences and the sides of buildings throughout town.

Police have been flooded with complaints about the graffiti, but Police Capt. Terry Medina said he doesn't equate it with gang behavior, because most of the spray painting is being done by young kids. "We arrested two kids recently for spray painting the side of Pajaro Valley Cold Storage, and they were so small they had to stand on their bikes," Medina said.

"What we have now isn't gang behavior," he said. "The most organized thing they're doing is graffiti. But we don't want it to get organized into the kind of criminal gang activities that are prevalent in San Jose, Los Angeles and Modesto."

Medina said the problem has to be addressed head-on by the community. "Parents have to be willing when they find a can of spray paint in their kids' clothes to confront them," he said.

It's difficult, if not impossible, for patrol officers to catch someone in the act of spray painting graffiti unless residents report it when they see it happening, Medina said.

Medina is also upset by the image graffiti gives Watsonville and the Mexican-American community.

"Calvo is correct that it's a community problem in the sense that the community should want to prevent serious crime and injury through the acts of misguided youth," said Medina. "But the problem of graffiti is exaggerated. They put a gang title on it and it's incorrect. It's also a perception of Watsonville that doesn't help us."

"The North County perception is we have gangs and gangs are Mexican and Mexican's kill each other,"

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said Medina. "The result is the Mexican-American community gets a bad rap."

While he places the responsibility on parents, Medina also challenged groups like LULAC, the League for United Latin-American Citizens, to get involved.

Celia Organista, president of LULAC's Pajaro Valley chapter, said LULAC is aware of the graffiti but agreed the situation is being "blown out of proportion."

She said the problem should be addressed by "a committee getting together with kids to find out what's lacking. There's nothing for kids to do in this town," Organista said.

Organista has talked with members of the Civic Center committee who are organizing a campaign to purchase the Fox Theatre and Masonic Temple to remind them that the area's youth need help, too.

"Isn't it the city's responsibility to provide them with something to do?" she asked.

She also pointed out LULAC is working on other fronts. "We're raising funds to send our kids to college," she said, adding finding affordable housing is LULAC's chief goal this year.

"To say we should drop our issue that's of critical importance to the city for another issue of critical importance doesn't make any sense," she said.

At least two city councilmen agreed with Calvo and Smith that the city should join the effort now. Councilman Dennis Osmer said money spent now could prove cost effective for the city in the long run.

And Councilman Tony Campos wants the city to research facilities that could be opened for youth activities.