

County joins assault on graffiti

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STAFF WRITER

Supervisor Walt Symons and Sheriff Mark Tracy armed themselves yesterday with paint brushes to help launch a countywide fight against graffiti.

Symons and Tracy were among a group of volunteers that painted a wall in Soquel to help promote the Great Graffiti Cover-up, a 12-week campaign to recruit 100 vol-

unteers to paint over graffiti in unincorporated areas of Santa Cruz County. Another graffiti cleanup group, which included supervisors Mardi Wormhoudt and Jan Beautz, met in Soquel yesterday.

The graffiti campaign is being coordinated by the Volunteers Centers, a non-profit organization that coordinates over 2,000 volunteers throughout the county.

Karen Delaney, the Volunteer Centers' director, said the county awarded her organization nearly \$40,000 to run a one-year pilot program that would rely on volunteers to clean up graffiti. Delaney is hoping individuals, community and civic groups will "adopt" a wall or other areas in their communities that are frequently hit by vandals.

Two 24-hour hotlines, which can

be used to report graffiti or volunteer to help, have been established, Delaney said. Corporations have donated large amounts of paint and other materials, she said. One company has offered to sell paint at about \$2 a gallon.

There have been numerous efforts by community organizations and individuals to clean up graffiti in the past, but sometimes they get "stumped" because they run

into logistical problems, such as contacting a particular property owner to get his or her permission to clean up the graffiti, Delaney said. The Great Graffiti Cover-up will act as a bridge in such cases, she said.

Sheriff Tracy said most cities in the county have their own graffiti abatement programs. The Great Graffiti Cover-up campaign will strengthen those programs by

cleaning up areas just outside those cities' jurisdictions.

The sheriff's department has three deputies dedicated to a graffiti abatement detail, Tracy said. That group is headed by Sargent Len Lofano.

Police, Lofano said, are getting better at catching vandals, in part because the community is getting more involved. What is frustrating,

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he said, is seeing these vandals take the "revolving door," returning to the street quickly with little more than a slap on the hand. One person, Lofano said, can be responsible for numerous acts of vandalism, causing thousands of dollars in damage in just one night.

Property damages under \$5,000 caused by vandals is considered a misdemeanor. Anything over \$5,000 is a felony and carries much stiffer penalties. Lofano said he would like to see a new law that makes it a felony if damage is estimated over \$300 or \$400.

There are laws that require convicted vandals to make restitution to the victim, but if the vandal or the vandal's family doesn't have the money, "you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip," Lofano said.

The Graffiti Cover-up will have a volunteer coordinator working exclusively in South County. Mike de Salazar will be working with community and civic groups and

schools in the Pajaro Valley. A graffiti cleanup, similar to the two held yesterday, will be staged Feb. 11 on Freedom Boulevard.

Last spring, the Watsonville City Council approved a comprehensive graffiti abatement program, which has a two-pronged attack.

One part involves cleaning up graffiti. Under this program, property owners have seven days in which to remove graffiti from their property or notify the city. If notified, city would sent out a contracted local painter to paint over the graffiti at no cost to the property owner.

If the property owner does not remove the graffiti and does not notify the city, the graffiti could be deemed a public nuisance and the city could then remove the offending marks and the property owner would be billed for the service.

The second part of the program involves restrictions on the sale of graffiti-related "tools," such as spray paint and large-tip markers.

Merchants are required to keep these materials in an area inaccessible to the public. Most merchants have opted to keep these items in locked cases.

Other components of the graffiti abatement program include education and prevention programs, working with high-risk youth and sponsoring art classes and mural contests.

The city estimates the graffiti abatement program will cost the city about \$32,000, which comes from the city's solid waste collection budget.

The city current graffiti abatement program went through a major revision after merchants and property owners opposed the first draft of the ordinance. In its original form, the ordinance required property owners to remove the graffiti within seven days at their expense or face a fine.

The Volunteer Centers' graffiti hotline numbers are 427-0462 and 722-7771.