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Merchants concerned over costs in graffiti war

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After an hour and a half of discussion of costs with Watsonville business owners, Graffiti Abatement committee members said they would rethink their proposed ordinance requiring merchants to remove graffiti from their property within seven days.

Last night's discussion in council chambers at City Hall attracted

eight people.

Although there was some discord, speakers agreed on one thing: "People want to clean up graffiti and they want to see stricter punishment for juveniles," said Dewey Beaudette, owner of Equity Express Financial Services, a mortgage brokerage service.

The meeting focused on the second ordinance in a two-part proposal. The first ordinance calls for

merchants to lock up graffiti media such as permanent marking pens and spray paints. The second requires business owners to paint over graffiti within seven days of a citation. If the owner does not remove the graffiti by the seventh day, a city contractor would be called to do so at the owner's expense.

Merchants argued the second ordinance would "twice victimize"

business owners.

"It's like we're the victims and we're being punished for being the victim," said Francis Tomosawa, the owner of an optometry business on East Lake. "It's not fair, it's not right, and it's not democratic."

Others attending agreed. "I do feel that the cost of this effort should be spread out," Beaudette said.

One speaker suggested business owners pay an additional \$1.50 on their business licenses to go toward paying a city contractor to paint over graffiti. Beaudette said he would gladly contribute to abatement efforts, but he thinks business owners should not pay all costs.

As the meeting progressed, speakers gave other suggestions.

One person suggested an overall

tax for all Watsonville citizens to cover costs. Another suggested raising garbage fees. Police Chief Terry Medina said the committee bypassed the idea of imposing a tax because "We just assumed residents wouldn't want a tax, no matter what it's for."

Committee member Dave Williams, who works with the Building Department, said any ad-

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ditional expenditures would put a burden on retired people with fixed incomes.

But business owners said they did not agree. One suggested implementing varying garbage and tax rates.

"It's the principal," said Tomosawa. "Sure, business owners can afford an extra \$1.50 every month, but it's an unequal tax. Every citizen should be taxed."

Abatement Committee members are not out to penalize business owners, said Medina. "Basically we want a commitment from business owners. We're not out to punish people."

The ordinance proposals are part of an effort to curb the growing graffiti problem, according to committee member Nancy Reutlinger, the senior administrative analyst in the city Public Works and Utilities Department. This morning, city employees set out to paint over graffiti on garbage cans and other city property. Other re-

cent efforts include monthly week-end cleanup efforts with youth volunteers.

In order for any abatement efforts to be successful, cities surrounding Watsonville should make equal efforts, said Bob Dwyer, a member of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce. "Unless Monterey, Salinas and Santa Cruz implement similar ordinances and make an equal effort, we're just whistling in the wind," he said. Surrounding cities should restrict juvenile access to graffiti media, he said.

The Abatement Committee held a meeting last week discussing the first part of the proposal that would require owners to lock up graffiti materials. Since the meeting, Dwyer said he met with business owners to discuss the ordinances.

Two of the largest businesses selling spray paints would contribute to the abatement efforts, he said.

Dwyer said Kmart owners will lock paints in cabinets, and Orchard Supply Hardware owners would put paints in an inaccessible

area. The costs of these efforts — paying for cabinets and additional clerks — would be passed on to the consumers, Dwyer said.

"This problem is very expensive. It costs businesses money to remove graffiti and these costs will be passed on to their patrons," Dwyer said.

Small business owners "are not happy" about having to make an additional effort to combat graffiti, Dwyer said. But he said they recognize the costs as investments to Watsonville's overall economic health.

"We're trying to attract jobs in this community," he said. "We need to project a positive image and graffiti undermines this positive image."

The discussion brought no resolutions. But Abatement Committee member Reutlinger said she drew one conclusion. "This is going to require some more work." She said when the committee meets on March 10, she will report the merchants' concerns and suggest looking into alternatives to the original proposal.