

Covering up the community



ABOVE: Rex Rackley paints over graffiti on the new Struve Slough Bridge last week as part of his regular duties. BELOW: Inside his mobile paint station, Rackley talks about his vast selection of paint colors that match dozens of specific locations around Watsonville where graffiti and tagging is a regular problem. *Crime & Criminals - Graffiti PP 9.3.08*

Growing graffiti problem a constant challenge for city

By ERIC ANDERSON

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Coral Fisher glared at several large tags of graffiti sprayed on the side of a Main Street building she owns, then frowned.

"Isn't it disgusting?" she asked rhetorically.

Seeing graffiti on her building was nothing new for Fisher, who's far from being the only building owner, businessperson or homeowner in Watsonville with a graffiti problem. While graffiti prevention and educational efforts are ongoing in the city, the problem has grown worse, officials say.

City building maintenance worker Rex Rackley, whose sole job is removing graffiti, said the problem has just gotten "bigger and bigger and bigger" since he started doing graffiti removal in April 2002.

"It's really bad," Rackley said. "If the city did not have someone doing it, it would look like East L.A. It's that bad."

Three groups are responsible for almost all graffiti, according to Watsonville police Lt. Darren Thompson, who said the problem has fluctuated — but has always existed — during his 20 years on the force. There are tagging crews made up primarily of teenagers, graffiti artists who create unauthorized murals, and gang members who use tags to mark their turf. Tagging crews are responsible for 70 percent of the city's graffiti, Rackley esti-



mated.

The punishment for those convicted of making graffiti varies by the amount of damage caused. If the damage is \$400 or more, offenders can receive up to one year in jail or a fine of up to \$10,000. If the damage is

\$10,000 or more, the punishment can reach more than a year in prison or up to a \$50,000 fine. If the graffiti can be shown to be for the benefit of a street gang, the punishment

GRAFFITI

From page 1

can be increased by what's known as a gang enhancement.

A challenge for police, however, is that tagging can be a difficult crime to prove, especially if there is no witness to identify the perpetrator. Thompson said police have been able to make a number of arrests for graffiti-related crimes this year, thanks to witnesses who quickly reported the incidents.

Mariaelena Tantaló, manager of the city's Neighborhood Services Department, which works with neighborhoods combating gang violence, said graffiti is a constant frustration for residents she works with. The city provides residents with free paint, brushes and rollers, while Neighborhood Services holds neighborhood cleanups, as well as graffiti awareness and prevention workshops.

"There are so many wonderful people that already say, 'I know every weekend I get my paintbrush, and roll my sleeves up and go paint (over graffiti),' " she said. "It's not something I like to do, but something I do for my community."

In neighborhoods with serious gang problems, graffiti's negative impact extends beyond being an eyesore, Tantaló said.

"Graffiti means something," she said. "It means, 'We're in the neighborhood. Like it or not, we are here, and we will control you.' That's why it's important for the community to say, 'You will not. We are going to keep painting over it and keep calling the police.'"

Without community involvement, the job falls almost entirely on Rackley, who averages about 150 work orders per month. Driving around town in a large utility van, he regularly checks out sites that are frequently targeted by taggers, and also responds to graffiti reports from the community. For each piece of graffiti he removes, he writes down the tag, takes a photograph of it and puts it into a laptop computer where he keeps his records.

"There's something on everything," he said. "I just get the bigger stuff or the stuff people complain about."

In the van, he has close to 30 five-gallon paint containers and 60 one-gallon containers, with many already matched to frequently hit sites, some of which are tagged on almost a daily

basis. For example, he has paint matching buildings at Ramsay Park and Callaghan Park, as well as the city's garbage bins. There's one footbridge on Main Street that Rackley estimated he's put at least 100 coats of paint on.

"I'll cover it up, the next day there it is again," he said.

Rackley said when he deals with the public, he urges them to get involved because "the city can't do everything."

"People need to get on board," he said. "It can't be a one-man band."

Due to the volume of graffiti calls, the city is in the process of putting out a brochure to local businesses that asks them to clean graffiti themselves rather than just rely on Rackley, said Nancy Lockwood of the city's Public Works and Utilities Department. Legally, businesses are only required to have graffiti cleaned up within a week, but the city is asking them to do so "right away if they can," Lockwood said.

"We encourage people to help us with it," said Assistant Public Works and Utilities Director Bob Geyer. "One of the things

that we know is the biggest deterrent out there is getting it covered up as soon as possible."

Geyer said the city's budget for graffiti removal was not immediately available.

One site Rackley visits from time to time is Fisher's building. As he rolled brown paint over the tags Tuesday, Fisher approached him to offer her thanks.

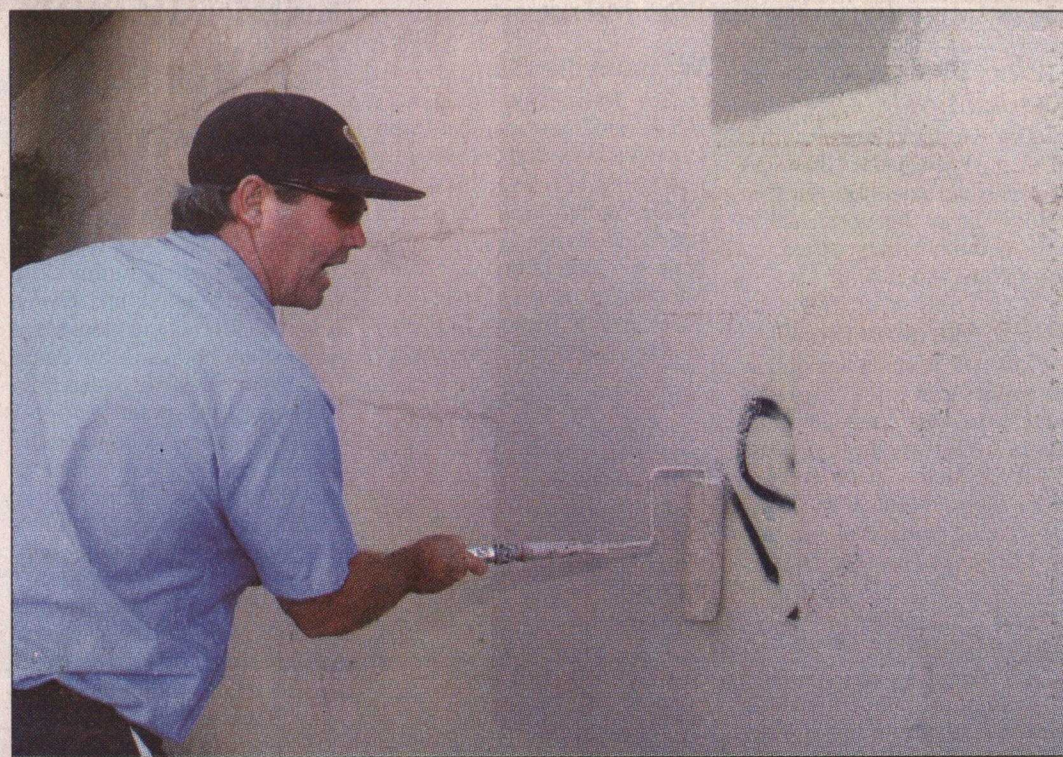
"I'm glad you're taking it off," said Fisher, who said later that the city was doing "a great job" with graffiti removal.

For Rackley, once that job was done, it was time to move onto the next part of his never-ending battle against graffiti.

"It's not a job where you're just sitting around," he said. "You're out working all the time."

People who witness graffiti being applied in progress should call 911. If the suspects are no longer there, they should call 471-1151.

Those unable to paint over graffiti themselves can call the city's Graffiti Abatement Program at 768-3133. Generally, graffiti will be painted over within 72 hours, Geyer said.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Rex Rackley buries a large splash of fresh graffiti Tuesday morning in a parking lot on Main Street.