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County-wide battle against graffiti begins

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

A county-wide effort has been launched to reduce graffiti, Santa Cruz County District Attorney Art Danner announced yesterday.

People from law enforcement and business are joining together to fight what Danner calls a "growing graffiti problem in the county."

Because police rarely catch

graffiti painters in the act, the Graffiti Task Force is encouraging public participation and reporting of incidents, much like a Neighborhood Watch program. A hotline has been established at 475-5179.

Kirk Gardner, a Capitola insurance agent, and Toni Castro, manager of the Capitola Chamber of Commerce, appeared at a press conference with Danner to report that graffiti is on the increase in

their city. The graffiti has gone beyond spray-painting to window etching, they said, making repairs or replacement especially expensive.

An anti-graffiti law passed by Capitola eases some of the red tape involved in painting over graffiti if the property owner does not quickly remove it himself.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said city officials have al-

ready discussed a similar ordinance. Watsonville wants to make sure its ordinance coincides with the others in the county.

Medina said community groups, and possibly jail inmates, could become involved in painting over graffiti.

The county's task force on gangs will work with the graffiti task force, Danner said.

Medina said graffiti "taggers,"

who paint graffiti with a form of signature, are becoming more prolific in Watsonville.

Gang graffiti has not increased, and may even be on the decline, Medina said. Gang members are sometimes reluctant to announce their affiliations with graffiti because of recent laws that increase jail sentences for crimes if prosecutors can show a gang connection.

The county's most active graffiti artist, Noah Levine, of Santa Cruz, was caught last year and pleaded guilty to causing \$10,000 worth of damage with his signature, "8-Edge."

Levine was sentenced to three years' probation, fined \$245 and was ordered to make restitution and perform 500 hours of community service. The DA's office had sought jail time for Levine.