

# City plans 'graffiti-cleanup' month

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STAFF WRITER

Watsonville residents will be painting — or rather, repainting — the town in the month of May.

Business people, city employees, community organizations and numerous volunteers, including local graffiti artist Mario Martinez, have been working on a cleanup of graffiti in the city to begin next month, with a major blitz planned for May 18.

Although Watsonville has had graffiti for years, many say the problem has gotten worse recently.

Martinez, the creator of the "Tazmanian Devil" mural in a parking lot behind the 400 block of Main Street, paints in a graffiti style. But he makes a distinction between the type of work he does and the "tagging" or writing of names, all over town.

"I don't really like the tagging," he said. "It looks bad."

The cleanup effort is being organized on several fronts.

Sam Ramos, one of the key organizers, has been contacting businesses and business organizations, asking those with graffiti on their buildings to paint it over.

"The business people have just kind of thrown up their hands (in the past)," he said. But all of the businesses he's contacted so far have agreed to join in the efforts, encouraged

by the community support.

Ramos has also received donations from businesses, including 110 gallons of paint in varying shades of gray, tan and white from Kelly-Moore Paint Co. in Santa Cruz. Ramos said he selected those colors because they are the most commonly used, and that the paint company told him he could take more if needed. The paint will be used for those who can't afford to do the work themselves.

Pat Donohue, Watsonville's recreation and parks director, said the city has enlisted the cooperation of local utility companies to paint over graffiti on their property. The Skills Center, which does custodial work and park maintenance for the city, has offered repainting services for a fee, she said.

The May 18 cleanup will be carried out by teams of five to 10 volunteers. Celia Organista, the director of Adelante, is coordinating the volunteers. She said she has been talking with Watsonville High School and hopes to get a good mix of youths and adults working on the crews. So far, 12 teams have signed up, she said. The city's police and fire departments are among those sponsoring teams.

Among the groups participating in the cleanup day are Adelante, Salud Para La Gente, Alto, Youth Services, the Board of Realtors, the Chamber of Commerce, the League of United Latin American Citizens, Catholic Charities, Fenix Family

Alcoholism Services, the city of Watsonville, and the Watsonville Development Committee.

A subcommittee of the group organizing the May 18 cleanup, dubbed "Watsonville Spring Painting Day," has been out taking photos of the worst sites in town and crews from the city's Public Works department have also been noting the particularly bad locations.

None of the organizers have the illusion that the cleanup will be a permanent solution to the city's graffiti problem.

"I think if we get caught up in thinking how long it's going to last we'll get discouraged," Organista said. But organizers are hoping that if the cleanup is viewed as a community event, with some of the friends and neighbors of graffiti writers involved, there'll be some community pressure against doing it.

Donohue said she's hoping that if the maintenance is kept up, with a graffiti being painted over within 24 to 48 hours after it's gone up, the writers may get discouraged.

Some of the organizers are also trying to handle the problem in another way.

Jane Hall, the owner of Belden-Hall Books, who provided the wall for Martinez's mural, has offered another wall on her building to graffiti artists. So far, a group of youthful artists, led by Martinez, have painted it twice.

Hall, Martinez and others have been looking for other walls that could be used, even temporarily, for legal graffiti. Hall said ideally, the youths would have a central place to store paint and Martinez and other local artists could teach some of the art skills they have.

Nane Alejandre, who works with "high-risk" youth at E.A. Hall school, said he's been talking to some of the graffiti artists he knows about participating in some kind of legal project that would include art instruction and education about the problems of illegal graffiti. They have expressed some interest, he said.

"I think it's a good idea," he said. Alejandre said more wall space was needed and also suggested "portable walls" made of plywood that could be painted and moved to various sites for display — if someone had the wood to donate.

Donohue said the city is considering letting youth use a wall at the city's Teen Center for graffiti art, but since the city will soon be tearing it down for renovation, she's not sure it's the best idea.

Martinez said the graffiti artists don't really have a problem with using a temporary canvas, since that's a risk they always run when they paint illegally.

**Anyone interested in the May 18 cleanup can call Celia Organista at Adelante at 724-2997.**