

# City begins program to inform residents on new graffiti laws

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Watsonville residents and certain local business owners will soon receive information about the city's two graffiti abatement programs.

Nancy Reutlinger, head of the Graffiti Abatement Committee, said the city will soon be mailing a brochure to residents that will explain the city's graffiti-removal ordinance. That brochure will be enclosed in the utility bill, she said.

**'I think we are going to see a big difference (in controlling graffiti.)'**

*— Nancy Reutlinger*

Businesses that sell spray paint and large-tip markers will receive a copy of the city ordinance restricting the sale of these "graffiti tools." Reutlinger said that mailing will probably go out in a week or two.

On May 10, the Watsonville City Council gave final approval to the two graffiti abatement ordinances, which go into effect 30 days from the adoption date.

The first ordinance applies to property owners hit by graffiti. They have seven days in which to remove the graffiti themselves or contact the city, which will remove it at no charge. If the property owners do not remove the graffiti and do not contact the city within the allocated time, however, they will be given a notice to remove the graffiti or permit the city to do it. If the property owner still refuses to take action, the city may consider the graffiti a public nuisance and remove the graffiti, billing the property owner for the service.

The second ordinance is aimed at reducing the accessibility of spray paint and large-tip markers — tools of the graffiti vandal. Merchants are required to store spray paint and permanent ink markers with a tip wider than 5/8 of an inch in a manner that makes these materials inaccessible to the public. Some merchants have already made arrangements to store these materials in locked cases.

State law prohibits the sale of spray paint to minors.

A little more than a year ago, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and the San Jose City Council adopted a similar ordinance restricting the sale of spray paint and markers. Some Watsonville merchants said the ordinance has had little or no effect on the amount of graffiti in the

South Bay Area, adding that Watsonville's ordinance will also fail to keep spray paint and markers out of the hands of vandals, many of whom are minors.

Reutlinger disagrees. Watsonville and the South Bay Area are vastly different, she said. For one thing, not all South Bay Area cities have adopted an ordinance restricting the sale of spray paint and markers. Someone from San Jose can easily cross into a neighboring city that hasn't adopted a similar graffiti ordinance to get spray paint or markers.

Watsonville, on the other hand, is more isolated, Reutlinger said. It's not as easy as crossing the street into another municipality. If minors wanted to steal spray paint or markers, they would have to take a bus or find a ride to a neighboring city, she said.

Local merchants that don't comply with the ordinance may find themselves the recipients of a criminal citation. Under the ordinance, merchants can be cited with a misdemeanor for non-compliance, Reutlinger said. That, however, is not likely to happen, she said.

"It's pretty unlikely we will have to go that far."

City officials plan to visit local merchants to discuss the ordinance and find ways to help them to comply, she said. The city will remain as flexible as possible and work closely with business owners.

The cost to some stores for display cases is quite high. At Kmart, for example, the store ordered 10 cases, each costing between \$500 and \$600. That company may be able to absorb the cost more easily than a small retailer.

The city also plans to work closely with property owners.

Reutlinger said the brochure will not only contain details about the city's graffiti abatement program, it will also include hints on how to remove graffiti and measures homeowners can take to discourage vandals, such as adding vegetation around fencing and walls.

The brochure will inform parents that under the law they will be responsible for making restitution to victims if their children are convicted of vandalizing property.

Other components of the graffiti abatement plan include education and prevention programs. The city will hold art classes and sponsor mural contests as ways of "redirecting" teenagers' energy and creativity.

Reutlinger is confident this "multi-prong" approach to graffiti abatement will help clean up the city.

"I think we are going to see a big difference."