

# Anti-graffiti task force takes shape in Capitola

By KEITH MURAOKA

Sentinel staff writer

CAPITOLA — Officials here want the city to become a graffiti-free zone.

An anti-graffiti task force, formed by the Capitola Chamber of Commerce, met Friday with City Attorney Richard Manning and county District Attorney Art Danner to talk about ways to catch and punish graffiti vandals.

Kirk Gardner, chamber president and head of the task force, said graffiti problems in Capitola have gotten worse in the past year. Assistant District Attorney Toni Allen agreed that graffiti is becoming more widespread throughout the county. She said graffiti is marred by highway overpasses from Santa Cruz to Aptos.

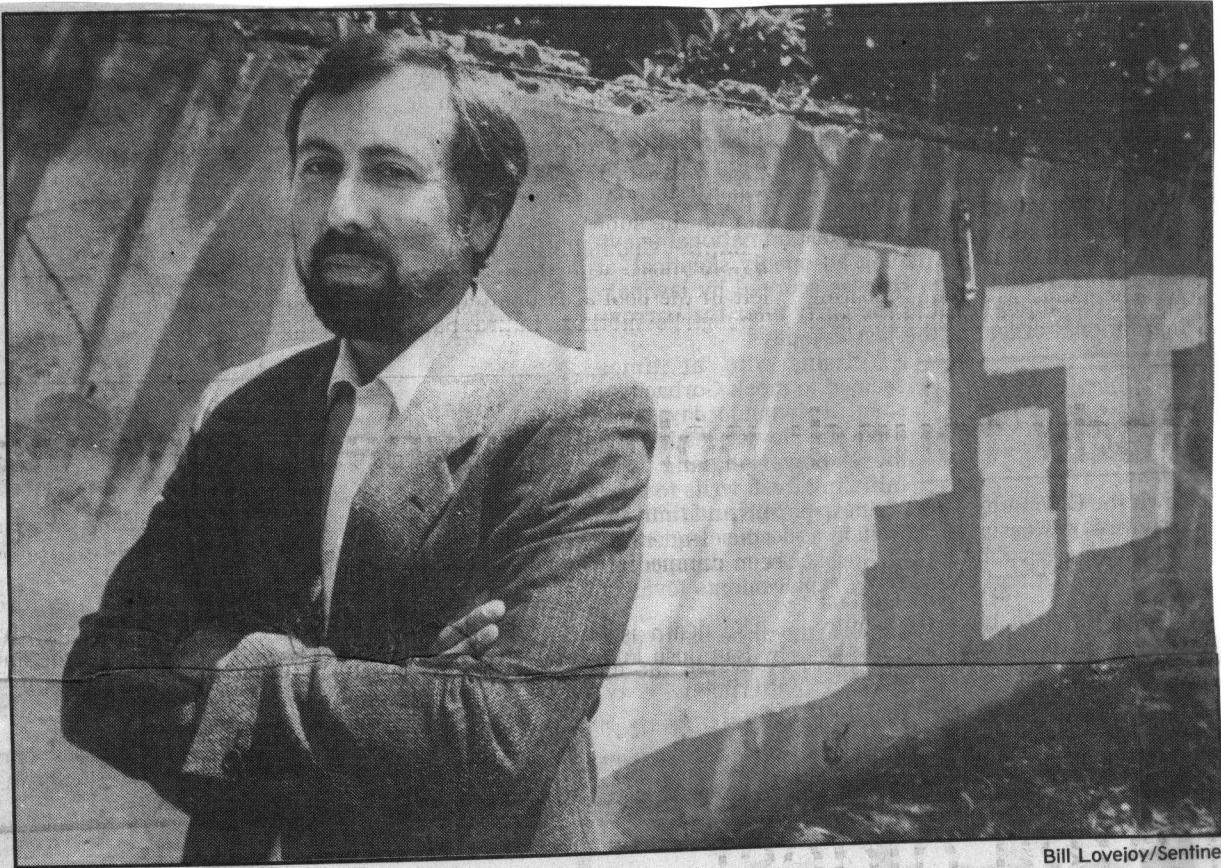
Jon Haro, work release specialist with the county Sheriff's Department, added that the problem involves different types of graffiti. "Taggers" scrawl their initials or graffiti names on as many public places as they can. Often such scrawling is gang-related. "Piecers," short for "masterpiecers," consider graffiti an art form, painting murals and such.

Last week, graffiti vandal Noah Levine of Aptos was ordered to perform 500 hours of volunteer service and clean up or pay for what has been estimated at \$20,000 in property damage. The 20-year-old Levine spray painted his "Bedge" signature throughout the county. Danner said Friday it was "unfortunate" that Municipal Court Judge Michael Barton didn't agree with his office that Levine be jailed for one year.

According to Danner, only Capitola and Watsonville have ordinances specifically outlawing graffiti, while the city of Santa Cruz is working on one. Manning said Capitola's ordinance provides procedures for getting rid of graffiti and penalties. It includes possible fines from \$300 to \$500. State law prohibits the sale of aerosol paint cans to minors.

However, the problem involves more than just catching the vandals.

Gardner said existing laws are vague. "Nobody knows what their responsibilities are, who is in



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Kirk Gardner, chamber president, said Capitola's graffiti has worsened in the past year.

charge of abatement and who is in charge of enforcement," he said. "Nothing is working at this point."

Gardner asked Manning if the task force had the right to paint over graffiti — essentially get rid of the problem on its own. Manning said that under Capitola's ordinance such abatement would only be allowed with the consent of the property owner. He said Capitola's ordinance requires written notification from the city to property owners and then gives the owner 30 days to clean the graffiti. In minor cases, the city also has the power to paint over the graffiti if a hold-harmless agreement is provided by the property owner.

Gardner and other task force members want to amend Capitola's ordinance to make everything easier. Chamber Manager Toni Castro called the ordinance "very vague," and said it needed "tightening up." Any changes would need to get City Council approval.

Capitola Police Chief Don Braunton agreed that "notices and letters are too much." He added, "We should have an ordinance that enables citizens, in general, to abate the (graffiti) problem themselves."

The task force has already set up a special graffiti hotline at 475-5179. Gardner said the hotline has two specific purposes: coming up with information on who's doing graffiti, and getting the addresses of places where graffiti is occurring.

Capitola Councilman Jerry Clarke said the council has directed staff to eliminate graffiti on city-owned property as soon as possible.

Gardner also said workers at the county's Buena Vista dump recycle latex paint, giving away free gray or white paint for those wishing to clean up graffiti. Haro also said that the sheriff's work release program supplies workers free to public agencies wishing to paint over graffiti.