

'It's not a harmless kind of crime.'

DISTRICT ATTORNEY BOB LEE

Santa Cruz's graffiti toll grows



Paul Martin volunteers to paint over graffiti around Santa Cruz. Friday, the always-busy Martin was blotting out messages the San Lorenzo River mouth. Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Crime & Criminals - Graffiti

Santa Cruz spends
\$3,000 per month
to remove tagging

By JENNIFER SQUIRES
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Vandalism is costing the city thousands of dollars a month, according to police.

Officers have taken about 600 reports of vandalism during the six-months from the beginning of November to the end of April.

That's 100 a month, and about 50 of those are just graffiti — signatures etched into windows or written with spray paint or markers on walls, bridges, electrical boxes, fences and other surfaces.

And those are just the incidents that people report, officers said.

"It's pretty consistent," said detective David Forbus, who works in the property-crimes division.

It's also a significant problem, he said. Although the area has not seen notable spikes in vandalism recently, repeated incidents of very visible graffiti — such as the tags on the Morrissey Boulevard signs along Highway



Taggers are painting over one another's signatures on the Highway 1 sign attached to the Morrissey Boulevard overpass.

5-13-06
Tagging
'becomes
a lifestyle'

By JENNIFER SQUIRES
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Tashann Battle, 19, received a one-year jail sentence — with all but three months suspended — 40 hours of community service, three years of probation and more than \$4,000 in fines when he pleaded guilty to eight counts of misdemeanor vandalism in Superior Court this month.

Graffiti like what Battle admitted to has been a growing problem in Santa Cruz, according to police, and one that's difficult to combat.

"I'm a very good artist," Battle told Judge Paul Burdick during the sentencing.

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1 painted last weekend — have drawn public attention to the graffiti problem.

"God, that's frustrating," sheriff's Sgt. Dan Campos said.

The graffiti problem in the city is divided, according to Forbus. Taggers paint their signatures in highly visible or daring locations. Gang-related graffiti tends to mark territory or communicate with others. Graffiti stenciled in spray paint on five Santa Cruz churches, a Christian bookstore and the historic Santa Cruz Mission Adobe in February was considered a hate crime. Political and ecoterrorism-related graffiti appear from time to time, like the SUVs someone hit with a black marker last month.

"They are all motivated by different things and sending differ-

ent messages," Forbus said.

But the demands graffiti makes on city staff and funds are similar, whatever the motivation.

The city spends about \$3,000 a month in supplies to remove graffiti from city-owned property, and repair damage caused by other vandalism, according to Forbus.

"It can get pricey," he said.

Staff time to clean up, track down vandals and prosecute them costs thousands more.

"It's not a harmless kind of crime," District Attorney Bob Lee said.

In the city, the Graffiti-Free Santa Cruz volunteer program, run by the Redevelopment Agency, works to eradicate graffiti as soon as it appears.

Most of the volunteers participate in the "adopt-a-block" program, in which they pledge to keep an area of their neighborhood clean, even if the area is just the back of a stop sign. Volunteers are given kits and regularly go

out to look for fresh tags.

"When you see it, you get it in whatever area you've committed to," said Julie Hendee, a Redevelopment Agency employee who coordinates Graffiti-Free Santa Cruz.

Outside the city, graffiti is not such a serious problem, according to Campos.

"That hasn't come into the county," he said.

The Sheriff's Office gets approximately 400 calls a month for property crimes. About 10 to 15 percent of those tend to be vandalism incidents, although vandalism could include incidents such as a car that was egged or a had a broken window.

"We're not seeing that much tagging," Campos said, noting graffiti reports to the Sheriff's Office usually come in bouts.

For information on Graffiti-Free Santa Cruz, call 420-5303.

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Diversion

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But the residents who cleaned up the tags Battle left all over town — he was initially charged with 15 misdemeanor vandalism counts, reduced to eight guilty pleas — don't agree. One man who addressed the court said he spotted Battle's mark in 17 different locations in his neighborhood one April morning.

"Graffiti is not a harmless, juvenile prank," Santa Cruz Mayor Cynthia Mathews said at the hearing.

As part of Battle's sentence, Burdick ordered the teenager to spend his community service hours cleaning up the tags he and others have written around the city. His fines include restitution to the residents and businesses he hit. And while he is on probation, he is prohibited from possessing

any "graffiti instruments," such as markers or spray paint. Police and probation officers can search him for those items at any time during his probation.

"This has got to be then end of this," Burdick told Battle in court. "The next time you will spend a year in jail."

But for many, there is no end. "They get kind of addicted to it," said Laura Garnette, director of the county Juvenile Probation Department. "It becomes kind of compulsive."

County District Attorney Bob Lee agrees.

"There's some people, it's almost like they believe it's their calling in life," Lee said. "A lot of this vandalism isn't youthful indiscretion. These people are adults."

Many start as kids trying to figure out who they are, according to Santa Cruz police detective David Forbus. For a while, it's just about bragging rights and experiment-

ing. If law enforcement officers can catch vandals when they're young, there's a good chance they'll stop for good.

"Usually it's just a one-shot deal," Garnette said.

In those cases, kids meet with boards composed of community members to talk about how the crime affected the neighborhood. If it's a second offense, they might do community service cleaning up graffiti, pay restitution or be put on probation, and that can be enough, according to Garnette.

But in more extreme situations it's not, even though penalties for adult offenders get more severe. Jail time, even a prison sentence, can be meted out by the court.

"I would say you're going to have a lot of people that do it again," Forbus said. "It becomes a lifestyle for them."

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