

Crime + Criminals - Graffiti

VOLUNTEER CENTER PROGRAM

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Funding cuts put graffiti project at risk

By JOEL HERSCH

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Facing budget cuts, the Graffiti Removal Project is concerned graffiti tagging around Santa Cruz County will be on the rise.

In the past year, the project has mobilized 300 volunteers to remove more than 200,000 square feet of graffiti from Davenport to the outskirts of Watsonville, according to a press release. But due to cuts in its funding, the group has raised concerns about having the resources to suppress increased tagging. The hardest hit the program has taken is from its loss of funding from the California Redevelopment Agency, which supplied it with about 20 percent of the annual \$79,000 budget, said Program Coordinator Jerry Shanahan, who has been with the Volunteer Center for 15 years.

The group, a part of the Santa Cruz Volunteer Center, is now appealing to the community and organizations for donations to keep the program running.

As a result of the work done by the Graffiti Removal Project, complaints by property owners have dropped, Shanahan said.

With the loss of funding, the program, which depends almost entirely on volunteer efforts, will not be able to remove graffiti tags as promptly, said Associate Director Lois Connell, and timing is critical in counteracting the vandalism.

The program tries to remove graffiti within 72 hours as a way of deterring the taggers, Connell said.

"If we can get there fast enough and paint over it, they often get discouraged," she said.

The program had to lay off its only graffiti removal employees, which the group relied on for quick responses to gang graffiti, Connell said.

Shanahan said there has been a significant increase in gang graffiti, which is the group's primary concern.

In partnership with Santa Cruz County Probation and the District Attorney's Office, the Graffiti Removal Project launched the "Offenders Restitution Initiative" in 2009. The initiative trains community volunteers to support and supervise vandalism offenders as they remove graffiti.

While the increase in labor is helpful, Shanahan said, the program is struggling to pay the insurance fees for the vandalism offenders.

The cost of materials is also adding up, he said.

The Graffiti Removal Project offers a range of services for individuals and neighborhoods in the unincorporated area of the county, Shanahan said. Homeowners and businesses that have been victims of graffiti vandalism can contact the Graffiti Removal Program to request that it be removed from their property free of charge.

dals, but Shanahan said he fears it wouldn't take long for graffiti to become out of con-

trol if the program is unable to respond to incidents right away.

"People might not see so much graffiti and think it's not that big of a problem, but

that's because we're so active with this program," Shanahan said. "Once that funding gets

cut and we're not able to get out there and do it, it's going to start reappearing."

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The project does talks at schools and offers prevention workshops that include information on strategies to reduce graffiti incidents, Shanahan said. Volunteers do monthly graffiti paint-outs, planting projects, neighborhood clean-ups and murals.

"The advantage of a mural is that once the mural is up, taggers give them a degree of respect because they see it as artwork, so they don't tag over them," he said.

The program, which has suppressed graffiti for the past 15 years, has worked quickly to stay ahead of graffiti van-

ABOUT THE PROJECT

To learn more about the program or to make a donation, visit www.scvolunteercenter.org. Donations can also be mailed to the Graffiti Removal Project at 1740 17th Ave, Santa Cruz, CA 95060.