

Watsonville draws up mural law

By Bob Johnson
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The Watsonville City Council has laid to rest a mural controversy that erupted when residents were stunned to discover about 10 weeks ago that a 500-square-foot mural had been spray-painted on the wall of a downtown business by a band of teen-agers.

The council has voted unanimously to request that from now on, muralists submit their plans

for review and discussion by the city design review commission.

When local spray-paint celebrity Mario Martinez came with seven friends from the Hit-and-Run graffiti group to the parking lot behind Main Street's 400 block one Saturday morning early in September, he said he figured they had taken their art form to unusually safe ground.

Property owner Jane Hall had given the group permission to

paint on a 12-foot-by-44-foot wall facing Union Street. And Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina was among the spectators who watched with fascination as the youths unloaded more than 150 cans of spray paint onto the wall.

When the work was done, however, some residents failed to appreciate the graffiti-style mural depicting a 12-foot-tall Tasmanian devil pointing toward a fractured Watsonville.

"Whoever is responsible for this should be disciplined and ordered to remove the mural immediately," wrote local real estate agent Ralph Oliver, who is co-chairman of the downtown recovery committee convened by the chamber of commerce after the earthquake.

Much of the debate centered on whether the Tasmanian devil is merely pointing at Watsonville or making an obscene gesture at the

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“It’s just another form of art — people express themselves in different ways.”

— Mario Martinez

Watsonville mural drew boos and now a new law

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beleaguered town — a clash of artistic interpretation inspired in part because the devil looks to have only three fingers.

When asked by Vice Mayor Oscar Rios why he engaged in graffiti, Martinez replied: "It's just another form of art — people express themselves in different ways. This is just my way of doing it."

Martinez's mother, Blanca Esquivel, who says she is glad to see her artistic son go legit in his creativity, said she feels the controversy has been less than fair.

"My son did it the right way and he got a lot of negative reports," Esquivel told the council last week. "Our children want to do something with their talent."

The council, however, found its way out of the difficulty.

"It would be difficult to draft an ordinance which avoids unnecessary intrusion on freedom of expression," City Attorney Luis Hernandez wrote in recommending against mandatory reviews of mu-

ral. Hernandez based his conclusion on a case out of the city of Indio, which went all the way to the U.S. Court of Appeal, where it lost its attempt to ban a mural depicting Mexican heritage from the wall of a local business.

The council avoided taking the devil to court by voting to make the mural review process voluntary. And Martinez said he is willing to sit down with the design review commission to discuss his murals in the future.

Rios suggested that the Parks and Recreation Department should encourage the artistic endeavors of local youth by designating an area for a mural competition.

And though not professing to be a critic, Rios offered that he, too, often shrugs his shoulders at public art. "Sometimes I go to big cities and especially in the financial districts, I see these big pieces of metal sticking out of the ground," he said. "I look at them and think somebody got a lot of money for doing that."