



The War On Graffiti Rages On: One City Fights It On Several Fronts!

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In the 20 years since incorporation, the City of Santa Clarita has been known as a desirable community with a low crime rate, excellent schools and a high quality of life. As the City, now encompassing a population of 180,000 continues to grow, Santa Clarita, like many communities in Southern California, has seen a significant rise in the level of graffiti related vandalism.

Santa Clarita embraces a “Zero Tolerance” approach to graffiti and has a goal to remove all graffiti within 24 hours of it being reported. In the first fifteen years following incorporation, Santa Clarita was able to manage the problem of graffiti vandalism through a program that largely relied upon a small group of community volunteers. With minimal assistance from City staff, volunteers were consistently able to respond to and remove more than 90% of all reported graffiti in our community.

In the past two years, reported incidents of graffiti have more than doubled. During the past twelve months, the City has received more than 5,000 calls and an additional 1,000 emails from our residents requesting the removal of graffiti in their neighborhoods. The City now spends in excess of \$500,000 each year to combat graffiti vandalism. Costs associated with graffiti clean up include personnel, equipment and supplies, contractual help and damage to City property such as our transit vehicles. Like every other City engaged in the war on graffiti, the dollars spent truly represent “wasted scarce resources” which could otherwise be used for building more park facilities, expansion of recreation programming or additional roadway maintenance.

In an effort to escalate the City’s battle in the war on graffiti, the City of Santa Clarita made the commitment to increase its efforts on a variety of fronts: community education, technology, outreach/education, surveillance and law enforcement.

One of the most effective tools is a city-funded Sheriff’s graffiti detective. In the last year, he has made over 100 arrests of local graffiti vandals and had a 100% conviction rate! In addition, the detective shut down an entire tagging crew that was responsible for over \$16,000 in damages in and around the City.

The City conducts an Outreach Program for local Elementary, Junior and High School students to educate youth about the repercussions for graffiti vandalism, to inspire them to take pride in their city, and also to inform them about the City’s reward program. This comprehensive outreach program also includes an educational component for parents, informing them about the signs of a “tagger” and what to do if they suspect their child may be a “tagger.”

Teens Against Graffiti (TAG) was created for youth ages 13 to 18 who want to help with graffiti removal in the City. Schools, youth, or church groups, and individuals may participate on the third Saturday of the every month by painting over graffiti. The program is organized and supervised by City staff.

Community meetings are held in graffiti “hot spot” neighborhoods several times a year. Residents and business owners are informed about the hotline, rewards program and how to get involved in graffiti clean-up projects. Businesses are also encouraged to take pro-active steps to prevent graffiti such as by planting vines on walls or installing cameras or graffiti proof surfacing on windows.

The Santa Clarita Community Court defendants are utilized to remove graffiti once a month to fulfill their community service hours. The Santa Clarita Community Court is a community-based diversion program that provides an alternative to the juvenile justice system for first-time, non-violent, juvenile offenders. Juvenile offenders who have committed non-violent petty crimes, such as shoplifting, speeding, and vandalism, are sentenced by a judge to perform community

service, attend diversion classes, and if necessary, pay financial penalties. If they complete the program, their crime does not go on their record.

A custom tracking database is used by all City divisions. City staff from all departments can enter graffiti removal requests, track removal progress, and upload photos into the database. The Sheriff's department is also able to access the graffiti database. This centralized data-base is an important tool for assessing graffiti restitution costs, tracking graffiti trends, arresting graffiti vandals, and tracking removal costs city-wide by each division.

The City purchased surveillance equipment which the Sheriff's Department utilizes in a mobile vehicle that is set up near graffiti hot spots throughout the City to catch graffiti vandals in the act. "Dummy" cameras are also used at various locations to deter graffiti.

Sting operations are conducted by members of the Sheriff's Department and the City's Graffiti Removal Team at local hardware and home improvement stores to ensure compliance with the City's ordinance which requires spray paint and large-tipped markers to be locked up. Stores are cited if they are in violation of the ordinance. Stings are also conducted at the Saugus Swap Meet to ensure that spray paint is locked up and not being sold to minors.

Once a year, organizations and businesses get together to remove graffiti in a massive city-wide graffiti removal effort,

Graffiti Wipe-Out Day. Hundreds of people are grouped into teams to remove graffiti from the washes, bridges and other large areas. The event is a wonderful community event, sponsored by local businesses and real estate agencies.

In 2006, the City's graffiti ordinance was revised to make it easier to enforce graffiti removal on private property. The graffiti must be removed within 7 calendar days from the date of the notice of public nuisance due to existence of graffiti order to abate. If the City abates the nuisance, then the cost of all code enforcement and graffiti removal efforts may be charged against the owner's property in the form of a special assessment or lien.

The City is in the process of developing a new interactive graffiti webpage. The webpage will provide a wealth of information for parents and community members. Once finalized in the Spring of 2007, the database will include: graffiti hotline number and e-Service request link, tips and advice for parents on how to identify if their child may be a tagger, how to volunteer to remove graffiti, a search tool to establish if graffiti is within City boundaries, information about the Rewards program and much more.

In Santa Clarita, the war on graffiti is being won, one block, one neighborhood, one housing tract at a time. Perseverance, action, timely graffiti removal, a committed community, Sheriffs department and City are key to Santa Clarita's success in its war on graffiti.