

Richmond Launches Anti-Graffiti Campaign

By Katherine Tam - West County Times

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HOW TO HELP

To volunteer for Richmond's anti-graffiti campaign, call Trina Jackson at 510-620-6581. A 24-hour voice recording offers information at 510-231-3031.

Richmond is recruiting volunteers in the battle against graffiti, and arming them with cleaning supplies to scrub public property clean as soon as they see it's marked up.

The first team was trained Saturday, and the call has gone out citywide for more people willing to roll up their sleeves.

"This is something that works if we get a broad cross-section of people across neighborhoods across the city," said City Councilman Tony Thurmond, who helped craft the program. "This is meant to complement what our (city) staff does, not replace what our staff does. If it (graffiti) happens on a weekend, you don't want it sitting there all weekend. If you have neighborhood people trained and have access to supplies, they can help get on it right away."

The city also is teaming with the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office to create a juvenile offender program in which those arrested for graffiti are ordered to remove it, City Manager Bill Lindsay said.

Officials also want to provide outlets for self-expression, such as murals and art projects, that don't involve marking public or private property without the owner's consent, said Michele Seville, the city's arts and culture manager.

"We want to try to find places where there can be street art, if you will, that has sort of the same aspect that graffiti does of having some fame come to you but have it done in a way that we can promote and recognize it as art," Lindsay said.

Like other urban areas, Richmond battles graffiti on buildings, fences, poles, stop signs, utility boxes and even trees. Some tags are gang-affiliated, but most are produced by youths seeking attention and fame from peers, said Trina Jackson, graffiti project manager.

Public works employees try to clean markings wherever they see them and whenever graffiti is called in, but it usually pops up again in the same spot or somewhere else. The city doesn't have the staff or funding to keep up, despite spending \$250,000 on anti-graffiti efforts last year, officials say. Hence the request for residents to pitch in.

To assist in the campaign, the city is paying Boyles and Associates \$25,000 to provide training and consultation for one year. The team helped reduce San Jose's graffiti from 71,541 markings in 1999 to 129 in 2006, in part because of increased city staffing and 3,000 volunteers who removed graffiti within 48 hours of its

appearance, consultant Rob Boyles said. In addition, the penalty for tagging was doubled to 66 hours of graffiti removal.

In Richmond, the first volunteer training session drew about 20 people on Saturday. Officials gave an overview of what kind of graffiti to target and how to get rid of it. They distributed kits with solvents, protective eye goggles, a mask to wear over the mouth, a name tag identifying the person as a city volunteer and a note pad.

Volunteers won't scrub every speck of graffiti they see. Officials told them to stick to public property such as parks, playgrounds and street signs. Stubborn tags that won't come off will be reported to the city, which will send out crews armed with more powerful solvents. Anything on private property should be called in to the city's code enforcement division.

Saturday's volunteers fanned out along a mile-long stretch of the Richmond Greenway, starting at 16th Street and Chanslor Avenue. They painted over graffiti on fences and buildings and scrubbing the stuff off poles, lampposts and concrete.

Bea Roberson lives in the Panhandle Annex neighborhood, where there isn't much graffiti. But she said she is volunteering to help eradicate tags in the city. She said she supports having those arrested perform graffiti abatement so they understand what it takes to remove it and the damage it causes. She also supports providing youth with other creative outlets.

"The kids need something to do in Richmond," Roberson said, "and if there was an organized way that they could paint murals or do art that could be recognized as theirs, I think that would help."

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ONLINE

Watch a video of Richmond volunteers removing graffiti at www.contracostatimes.com.