

## **Fighting the Graffiti Crisis in San Francisco**

**By Ed Lee, Director of the Department of Public Works**

Graffiti plagues our neighborhoods. It is on our businesses, schools, recreation centers and homes. It covers our parking signs, post boxes, and newspaper racks. Illegal graffiti is vandalism and an epidemic that erodes at our quality of life.

The Department averages 600 – 1,000 graffiti complaints a month. It employs 13 graffiti workers and operates three graffiti vans seven days a week. In spite of tireless efforts, the Department is still fighting what often feels to be an “unwinnable” fight. It would take \$10 million dollars to cover the cost of painting out all graffiti. DPW only has \$1 million. Help is needed. How can everyone battle the graffiti crisis?

Residents and property owners have an opportunity to communicate that San Francisco has zero tolerance for graffiti. With the passing of Article 23 of the Public Works Code, DPW can no longer legally provide a complementary graffiti paint-out to property owners. The ordinance is in response to the increasingly difficult financial situation of the City; the resources to provide this service are simply not available. However, property owners can set the tone for their neighborhoods by quickly eradicating graffiti from their properties. They will be legally responsible to do so within 30 days of notification. However, wiping out graffiti is less about legal responsibility and more about taking back the neighborhoods, and sending the message that graffiti will not be tolerated.

Residents, community groups, non-profits and businesses can join Graffiti Watch, a group of dedicated volunteers who partner with DPW to paint out illegal graffiti on public property. DPW is excited about this new volunteer program, which is launching this month with a MUNI bus shelter poster campaign. To learn more about Graffiti Watch, please call 28-CLEAN or email [28clean@sfdpw.org](mailto:28clean@sfdpw.org).

Be our “eyes and ears.” By reporting graffiti to 28-CLEAN as quickly as possible, residents can alert us to graffiti locations. Being on the watch for graffiti is vital. The longer graffiti remains, the more inviting the location becomes to other “taggers.” If vandals see their work quickly removed, they will move on. If it remains, vandals will return knowing that the effort is worth their time.

In San Francisco’s fight against graffiti, DPW is tirelessly working on other partnerships and programs. Some other efforts include:

- Mayor Gavin Newsom is personally calling property owners who are persistently impacted by graffiti vandalism so that they can discuss how property owners can help fight graffiti vandalism, and the benefits of quickly painting out “tags.”
- The Graffiti Advisory Board is discussing the possibility of establishing a rewards program for community members who assist in catching graffiti vandals who are causing this citywide problem.
- The District Attorney’s Office, SFPD and the Graffiti Advisory Board are working together to convict repeat offenders. In one recent case, a juvenile graffiti vandal was given 300 hours of community service, which required the offender to paint out graffiti with the Police Graffiti Program. The offender’s parents had to pay \$8,000 in restitution to the victims.

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- DPW will continue to develop and recruit new volunteers for Graffiti Watch. Viacom Outdoor will post Graffiti Watch posters at 30 bus stops across the City in an effort to promote this new volunteer program.
- DPW is currently working with non-profit partners, such as the Pre-Trial Diversion Program, to abate graffiti on public structures.
- The Department will enforce the responsibility of construction contractors and utility companies to eradicate graffiti on project signage, equipment and storage boxes within 48 hours.

The Department will also hold public hearings on graffiti violations. Public hearings are an opportunity for property and/or business owners to prove that painting out graffiti within the mandated 30-days of notification is a hardship. If it is not possible for an owner to eradicate the graffiti, DPW will discuss a fair solution with the owner.

Fairness is paramount. The Department does not see graffiti as fair to San Franciscans. It is not fair that such a beautiful City be plagued with a vandalism that deteriorates the quality of our lives. Together we can turn what seems to be an impossible situation around. We can send the message to vandals that San Francisco is a “graffiti free zone.”

***To learn more about everyone’s legal responsibilities under Article 23 of the Public Works code, please log on to [http://www.sfgov.org/site/government\\_index.asp#codes](http://www.sfgov.org/site/government_index.asp#codes). To learn more about the Police’s graffiti abatement program and the penalties associated with graffiti vandalism, log onto [www.sfgov.org/graffiti](http://www.sfgov.org/graffiti).***