

Neighborhoods take aim at graffiti

By JUAN PEREZ JR.

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

The sight of crude graffiti "tags" near Barry Wells' southeast Omaha home brings a familiar feeling to the longtime resident's mind.

"A feeling of violation," he told a group of community leaders and residents Thursday night. "Somebody's been way too close to your stuff."

When a vandal's tag recently appeared on a neighbor's garage, "that was way too close," Wells said. "I hope whoever did it saw us take it down."

Long a recurring problem in South Omaha, graffiti has infuriated residents for its degradation of property values and perceived links to gang activity.

A three-day seminar, led by City Councilman Garry Gerhardt and other civic leaders, aims to fix it by bringing together volunteer groups and policymakers to develop solutions.

Rick Stanton, the keynote

speaker and head of an anti-graffiti consulting firm, delivered a blunt message to the 50 people in attendance at the Kroc Center, 2825 Y St.

"It's an insult to your quality of life. And it's an insult to you and your families when there's graffiti in your neighborhood," he said.

Stanton spent a decade working as an anti-graffiti consultant in San Jose, Calif., and told the audience that taggers were often crews of young males who cited "fame" as their primary motivation for their work.

"They want the recognition," Stanton said. "They want cars to drive by and see it, they want their peers to see it."

Stanton said his examination concluded that about 5 percent of graffiti in Omaha is gang-related.

Meanwhile, police statistics logged 1,586 instances of gang-related graffiti in 2010, down from 2,256 known gang-related instances in 2009.

"Gang graffiti is dangerous," Stanton said. "A lot of it is territorial, and it's the most dangerous kind of graffiti."

Tougher public policy and increased police attention are two key ways to combat the spread of vandalism, Stanton said, but neighborhood residents need to take the lead.

He urged those who spot graffiti to contact the Mayor's Hotline at 402-444-5555 or remove vandalism that's not gang-related on their own. Free crates of solvent, gloves and sponges were given to audience members.

"The city can't do it alone," Stanton said. "This is an ongoing battle with taggers. You need to show them that graffiti is not to be tolerated in your neighborhood."

Barry Wells listened hard. He walked out of the auditorium with two boxes of cleaning supplies.

Contact the writer:
402-444-1068, johnny.perez@owh.com