

Tackling graffiti the San Jose way

Rapid removal, long community service cut problem by 99.88%

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Times Colonist

Graffiti vandals can be stopped from defacing urban spaces but it takes a concentrated effort by police, the courts and the community, says an anti-graffiti consultant.

San Jose, Calif., has all but stamped out graffiti, in part by removing it rapidly and punishing offenders with long periods of community service, said Rick Stanton, who developed that city's program.

"We made a lot of mistakes but we found out what works also," said Stanton, speaking yesterday to police officers, municipal and business

representatives at the TAGS Anti-Graffiti Symposium at the Ocean Pointe Resort.

Stanton developed the program as a municipal employee before hitting the road as a consultant to share his knowledge with city officials across North America.

"We figured out the formula to get rid of graffiti in San Jose and we actually reduced graffiti by 99.88 per cent during the time I was there," said Stanton in an interview prior to his presentation.

Over six years, the number of graffiti tags across the city dropped from 71,000 to 129, he said. Word spread of the

city's success and Stanton has received calls from all over the world wanting to know what to do about rampant graffiti.

The key to success is to get rid of the tags quickly and arrest those responsible.

"Something has to happen to them when they do get caught, because otherwise they'll just keep doing it over and over again," said Stanton.

San Jose punished first offenders by requiring them to do 66 hours of community service, often cleaning up graffiti from city structures.

After a second offence, the time of community service doubled.

The community must also get involved by reporting and removing graffiti, he said.

"We had more than 3,400 graffiti volunteers

who'd go out and get rid of graffiti on their own time," said Stanton.

"They were tired of seeing their property values go down, they were tired of seeing their kids walk to school and see the graffiti."

But it all requires working together, Stanton said. "There are a lot of people out there in neighbourhoods who want to do something but they're not sure what, not sure how," he said.

"We show the cities how to engage all these people."

One city Stanton worked with was able to reduce graffiti 62 per cent in one year with no additional money.

"A lot of it is collaboration and co-operation and getting the community to support you."

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Varieties of graffiti key

The first step in eliminating graffiti is identifying it, said a U.S. police investigator at a Victoria conference yesterday.

There are five main types of graffiti, Sgt. Dwight Waldo told police officers, municipal and business representatives attending the TAGS Anti-Graffiti Symposium at the Ocean Pointe Resort. Waldo heads up a graffiti task force at the San Bernardino Police Department and has testified as an expert on cases involving graffiti in the California city.

■ **Tags** — attempts by those responsible to gain personal fame. They leave their marks in high-visibility locations and take risks to do so, said Waldo.

"Taggers are all about fame."

■ **Gang** — territorial and threatening by nature, said Waldo. Colours are significant since they represent various gangs.

■ **Hate-based** — intended to intimidate. It can involve race, religion or sexual orientation.

■ **Political**.

■ **Art** — some graffiti is considered art because the artists have permission to use a particular space.

—Sandra McCulloch