



SUN POST-HERALD

THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2010

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City tries to erase graffiti woes

Writing could be on the wall for offenders if council approves rewards to fight problem

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LAKEWOOD — As more and more graffiti is showing up on buildings, Dumpsters and post office boxes in central and western parts of the city, police are cracking down on offenders. Their investigations may become even more effective soon, as City Council is considering funding \$5,000 in rewards to help officers gather more

information about the property defacement spree.

In recent months, the Lakewood Police Department has charged 10 young adults, most of whom live in the city, with criminal damaging. Using Hot Spot Analysis, police identified areas with the most recent damage and the likely days and times they were being tagged before initiating a special detail to arrest suspects.

While off duty in January, Ward 3 police officer Kevin Fischer spotted a boy spray-painting a Dumpster and Special Operations officers arrested an 18-year-old after the suspect committed a theft in early February. They found graffiti markers on the suspect and the information they gathered from these arrests led to more. Off-duty officer Patrick Cantlin caught a 19-year-old defacing a business and more information from these inci-

dents, and subsequent investigations, led to more arrests. Police most recently picked up three teenagers for spray-painting a Madison Avenue business and Lakewood High School.

"Some (arrests) just came from getting leads from other police reports and putting two and two together," said Police Chief Tim Malley. "This is the result of some really good police work on our officers' part, doing some

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work above and beyond, and a good, coordinated effort with the building department."

All of the juveniles will be filed on in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court with multiple cases of criminal damaging. Two suspects already pleaded guilty in Lakewood Municipal Court where Judge Patrick Carroll sentenced them to jail. Another pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing.

Police are finding that the graffiti is not gang related, but instead suspect a group in a "loosely affiliated subculture that promotes damaging property through graffiti." Most vandalism is simply a tag with a person's name.

"Quite a few of them seem to hang out at a local coffee shop," Malley said. "That might be where they get to know each other. They like to hang around these areas and this is how they're killing time."

The police department is working closely with the city's building department, which photographs this kind of damage. Police then take that information and use it to connect a suspect to previous incidents.

"You can get good leads

just by documenting what's on the properties," Malley said. "We may catch a kid doing one Dumpster, and we'll look at the photos, and you can go back and connect him to other instances."

The building department is working with LakewoodAlive, the city's nonprofit economic development group, to show affected businesses the best products to remove the graffiti.

"We're putting forth a strong message that we're not going to put up with public defacement of property in the city," said Jeff Ashby, assistant director of public safety, division of housing and building, at the last City Council meeting.

Law enforcement and the building department may have a new tool as well, if City Council allocates \$5,000 for rewards to those who provide information that leads to an arrest or conviction of graffiti suspects. The idea, proposed by Ashby and Ward 2 Councilman Tom Bullock, is meant to aid in ongoing investigations.

Bullock says additional steps to preventing graffiti could include new options to help businesses adhere to the city's 48-hour clean-up laws, installing security cameras and expand educational efforts to businesses, schools and residents.