

## Livermore to battle graffiti with art

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There was a time when a utility box in downtown Hayward couldn't make it through a week without getting "tagged."

Volunteers and city workers were dispatched every couple of days to remove the gang markings and other forms of graffiti from the structures, which added tens of thousands of dollars worth of man hours over the course of a year.

But then city officials discovered something amazing: If you paint it, they'll leave it alone.

As contradictory as that may sound, adding colorful murals to aboveground utility and signal boxes has helped reduce the occurrence of graffiti by 97 percent in Hayward, said Stacey Sorensen, neighborhood partnership manager for the city.

"It has been a very successful deterrent," Sorensen said. "There seems to be sort of an underlying, underground respect for the art."

Taking a lesson from Hayward, Livermore now has approved a plan to commission artists to paint artworks on utility boxes throughout town. The cost is relatively cheap -- \$150 per box -- and the idea is to get businesses and individuals to sponsor the boxes, said Catherine Hagebusch, Livermore's economic development manager.

Livermore's council on Monday approved a recommendation by the Commission for the Arts and city staff members to allocate \$750 from the Art in Public Places Fund to paint the first five utility boxes. The large boxes in the downtown area will be the first to benefit, because they tend to be tagged by graffiti more often, staff reports indicate.

Youth participation is encouraged, but the program is open to artists of all ages. Prospective painters must submit their design ideas to the city in order to be considered for a box. Artists are responsible for prepping the utility boxes, painting them and applying a clear coat to the finished work. Those who are selected will receive a \$150 stipend.

"Being a former teacher and interested in education, I thought it would be such a wonderful opportunity for students to have the experience and get their work out there," said Livermore commissioner for the arts Sally Dunlop.

In May, Dunlop attended a workshop hosted by Hayward officials to share information about their program. She said she was struck by the beauty and variety of the utility box artwork, which ranged from flowers to frogs to pandas.

Livermore is the only local jurisdiction besides Hayward that has implemented such a program so far, though Alameda County is working on one and a number of other jurisdictions have expressed interest, Sorensen said.

Sorensen said she got the idea for the painted boxes after seeing a few of them in Southern California. Hayward's manager and mayor embraced the idea as a way of combating graffiti on utility boxes.

In April 2009, Hayward officials allocated \$2,000 for 12 boxes. More than 30 boxes have been completed, and about 18 others are scheduled to be finished in the summer.

The cost of the program is minuscule compared with the \$20,000 to \$30,000 annually it saves in cleanup fees, Sorensen said, adding that only a handful of the boxes have been victimized by graffiti since being painted.

The community support has been tremendous.

"It creates jobs to local artists and helps local businesses, too, because we encourage artists to get all their supplies at local stores," she said.

Livermore Councilman Doug Horner, an architect who works in Hayward, lauded the visual appeal of the artwork.

"I drive by those decorated boxes every day and they're absolutely delightful," he said.

For details on how to apply to paint or sponsor a utility box in Livermore, email Hagebusch at [chagebusch@ci.livermore.ca.us](mailto:chagebusch@ci.livermore.ca.us) or go to the Livermore Economic Development Department, 1052 S. Livermore Ave. For details on Hayward's program, call Sorensen at 510-583-4233.