



## Snohomish County Council

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### NEWS RELEASE

## **COUNCILMEMBERS EXPRESS RESERVATIONS ABOUT PROPOSED GRAFFITI PENALTIES**

Snohomish County Councilmembers expressed reservations about the Executive's proposal to penalize property owners who are victims of graffiti. At a meeting of the Planning and Community Development Committee on Tuesday, Council was briefed on legislation proposed by the Executive to stiffen the penalties against people who deface public and private property with graffiti and for those who carry implements of graffiti. The ordinance also would place the responsibility for cleaning up the graffiti on the owners of the defaced property.

Councilmember Dave Somers, Chair of the Planning and Community Development Committee, stated "I am deeply concerned about the prospect of victimizing innocent property owners twice. To require them to undo the damage to their property or face penalties of \$100 per day is extreme. And the ordinance has no exception for cases of hardship. While the Executive has stated that he intends these penalties only for the most flagrant abuses, the ordinance does not contain any limitations."

Graffiti can be a sign of gang activity or other illegal activities. Studies have shown that cleaning up graffiti quickly can result in a reduction of graffiti activity. Graffiti is a blight on neighborhoods, and often contains profanity and gang symbols. However, in some large cities, where graffiti is arguably a greater problem than in Snohomish County, clean up is often done by city forces at no charge to the property owners. Any penalties are reserved for those property owners who refuse to cooperate with city staff. In other graffiti codes, there are provisions for hardship that would relieve victimized property owners who cannot afford to pay for repairing the damage to their property.

“The maximum penalty for the perpetrators is \$500, while property owners can face penalties of thousands of dollars,” noted Councilmember Kirke Sievers. “If cleaning up graffiti in 72 hours serves a public goal, then it seems to me that we should explore the possibility of using county staff to do it.”

Councilmember John Koster expressed deep concern about making innocent parties subject to monetary penalties. “I really object to the idea that the county will be punishing a crime victim who suffers damage to his or her property. This legislation would subject these crime victims to penalties of \$100 per day, plus additional penalties of \$1,000 under the terms and conditions of a clean up agreement that is supposed to be voluntary.”

“We need to think carefully about whether this approach will actually serve to discourage graffiti and whether it focuses on the areas most plagued by graffiti,” stated Councilmember Gary Nelson. “I will be looking forward to information about how this legislative approach will work with homeowners associations and the Washington State Department of Transportation, whose fences and overpasses are prime targets of graffiti.”

Tuesday’s briefing was the first before the Planning and Community Development Committee. Councilmember Somers will be scheduling follow up briefings. “We will be looking closely at this issue in the next several months,” he said, “and I look forward to working with the Executive to make sure that Snohomish County government can tackle the graffiti problem without punishing innocent property owners.”