

## Venice Beach:

# Future of graffiti walls comes to community discussion table

BY VINCE ECHAVARIA

They are covered with an array of colorful designs and stand in the background of the Venice Beach Boardwalk near Windward Avenue, just off the beach bicycle path.

As new designs are added, the smell of fresh spray paint emits from them into the ocean breeze.

To some, the graffiti walls at Venice Beach are an "icon" in the community, a place for young artists to express themselves.

The two walls and cone structures have become as much a fixture of the Boardwalk as the street performers, some locals say.

"They've become sort of a landmark of L.A.," said Stash Maleski, of In Creative Unity Art, a Venice-based art production company that works with local graffiti artists. "They are a cultural tourist attraction and really represent the street culture.

"That's what people come to L.A. to see — the street culture."

But to some other local community members, the graffiti wall represents the origin of other spray-painting activity throughout the Venice community and parts of Los Angeles.

They claim that many spray-painters who come to the beach graffiti walls are leaving the site and then "tagging" other parts of



VENICE BEACH GRAFFITI WALLS

(Argonaut photo by T.W. Brown)

the community, such as sides of buildings, street signs and trees — some with graffiti allegedly tied to gang activity.

A solution to the problem of increased graffiti activity, some say, might be to take down the graffiti walls on the beach, where

some of the alleged illegal "taggers" are starting out.

A group of local residents addressed the idea at a meeting of the Venice Neighborhood Council Tuesday, July 18th.

"We want the graffiti walls removed," said one resident, who

did not want his name printed. "We want a safer and cleaner neighborhood."

Another resident, who supports removing the graffiti walls, said many of the alleged illegal spray-painters are coming from other communities to spray in

Venice.

Los Angeles Police Department officer Peggy Thusing, who patrols Venice Beach, also spoke to the Neighborhood Council about the recent increase of alleged illegal spray-painting in the community and to discuss potential solutions.

"We understand that the concept was a good idea because it gave kids a place to go," Thusing said of the beach graffiti wall.

"But the crime that has increased in the area is unbelievable," added Thusing, referring to the alleged illegal graffiti.

The cost for LAPD to remove graffiti in the Pacific Community is \$420,000 a year, she said.

Some top LAPD Pacific Community officers are "on board with fixing the problem," which could lead to an effort to remove the beach graffiti walls, Thusing said.

But for several other residents at the Neighborhood Council meeting, removing the Venice Beach graffiti walls is not the way to solve the problem.

"That's public art," resident David Buchanan said of the walls. "It's public art as much as any place in Venice."

"If we outlaw the graffiti walls, where's it going to stop?" asked resident Jim Smith.

Maleski said the walls, which

are known to graffiti artists around the world, have recently become "overrun" because of the high demand for artists to paint at the site.

One solution to the problem of increased graffiti elsewhere in Venice is "mitigation," Maleski said.

Suzanne Thompson and Judith Baca of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, agreed that mitigation of the activity is an answer.

Many of the local public graffiti sites have disappeared, which has put pressure on the beach graffiti walls because they are the only major site for people to paint, Baca said.

One answer to this problem is to open up more public graffiti sites for the community that are "controlled and monitored," as well as provided with moderate policing, Baca suggested.

The Venice Neighborhood Council voted to table the agenda item regarding a letter requesting the removal of the graffiti walls, to allow for further review of the issue by the Ocean Front Walk and Arts committees.