

As graffiti grows, Oakland council slow to disperse mural funds



By **MIKE BLASKY** | Bay Area News Group
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OAKLAND — As graffiti in the city escalated several years ago, city leaders decided to try a new — artistic — alternative to aid the city’s endless fight against vandalism.

The City Council set aside \$400,000 in 2013 for “blight abatement” to be evenly split among the eight council members. Their mandate was to find artists interested in developing murals or “green” vegetation walls to cover some of the most sprayed and scribbled neighborhoods in their districts.

But almost two years later, most of the money the council gave itself remains unspent, with only a few projects receiving money. That’s frustrated local artists, who say the council is dragging its feet dispersing funds.

“It’s just irresponsible,” said local artist Desi Mundo, executive director of the Community Rejuvenation Project, or CRP, a nonprofit group specializing in community murals. “They have the money, but they don’t have the vision.”

Using public money to fund the murals would give the city and community some design oversight over the murals, while also reducing unwanted, illegal graffiti. Taggers generally respect murals, according to local street artists, but treat bare walls like a blank canvas.

Like fighting fire with more fire, officials hoped to fight spray paint with more spray paint.

“The idea was for more art, and less blight,” said Eric Arnold, a spokesman for the CRP.

Not a fan of murals

Arnold and Mundo singled out council members Desley Brooks and Larry Reid, who serve East Oakland, a community in the city that’s been particularly stricken by blight. Neither responded to the CRP’s requests for developing murals in their districts, Arnold said.

Brooks wasn’t interested in helping fund a mural to raise awareness about domestic violence, Arnold said, but didn’t offer an alternative. When the group pressed her, she didn’t return a call or email, he said.

“I can’t really speculate why that is, but I don’t understand why she wouldn’t want to spend money that’s already been allocated,” Arnold said.

Brooks apparently has her own ideas. Late last week she introduced a resolution to fund murals in her district targeting utility boxes, a frequent target of taggers.

Overall, however, Brooks has indicated she isn’t a big fan of the expansive murals that cover many walls in Oakland. She encouraged people to look at the number of murals that already exist in her district, almost all funded without any help from the city.

Does the city need more murals, or are artists simply money-hungry?

“Just because we have the money doesn’t mean there’s only one way we can use that money,” Brooks said.

Over the last four or five years, CRP has produced 150 local murals by working with local businesses, community organizations and the city’s cultural arts division, Arnold said.

There’s always more to create, he said, and the city is sitting on an untapped reserve that could be used to help local businesses pay for art.

“We aren’t saying it has to be us that’s doing the murals,” Arnold said. “But give the money to someone.”

Officials say the money won’t disappear if it’s not used by the next two-year budget cycle, which begins this summer. But why isn’t the council spending the money?

“I think it’s just disinterest,” Arnold said.

‘Tax dollars at work’

But although artists yearn to work in East Oakland — where Mundo lives — it’s not just Reid and Brooks sitting on the sidelines.

Of the \$400,000 the council approved, only \$14,100 has been formally allocated, and on just two projects, according to Susan Sanchez, a city staffer who is helping the council manage the money.

Council President Lynette Gibson McElhaney gave \$11,000 for an Attitudinal Healing Connection mural on the M. Robinson Baker YMCA on Market Street, and Councilman Noel Gallo gave \$3,100 for a 50-foot mural in the Fruitvale District.

Council members said the amount of paperwork involved with the contracts has been a challenge for their staffs, which typically aren’t in the business of managing funds. Sanchez was working to develop a cheat sheet for council members on how to navigate the complicated bureaucratic process.

Some council members are farther ahead than their colleagues.

Gibson McElhaney has been one of the most “proactive” council members, according to artists. She has four other projects already approved by the council and four others in the development stage.

The councilwoman said abatement murals were one of her budget priorities two years ago. But if the money isn’t being spread around the city as it was intended, she said, it might have been a better idea to centralize the process instead of burdening the individual council members.

“We wanted a process where the whole city could be involved,” Gibson McElhaney said.

The graffiti issue isn’t going away, however. Gibson McElhaney said she hopes to get feedback from residents on how to improve the process.

One of the projects she’s funding is at Alice and 14th streets near downtown. The walls overlooking the dreary parking lot were covered with crude gang tags and other unseemly graffiti a year ago.

But now the area is being transformed by CRP into one of the city’s premiere public art projects. Artists are working on “phase two” of the project, Arnold said, praising Gibson McElhaney’s \$2,500 contribution.

“These are your tax dollars at work,” Arnold said as he watched Mundo working last week.

Arnold said the mural has largely been left alone by taggers. But it’s likely, officials say, that taggers are simply finding other walls, signs and freeways to target.

Chronic problem

City officials estimated a few years ago that more than \$1 million was spent on removing graffiti from public buildings, and the problem has only gotten worse.

“It continues to grow,” said Kristine Shaff, a spokeswoman with the city’s public works department. “There’s no amount of money we can throw at (the problem). We don’t know how to stop it.”

Her advice to business owners — take care of your property. Cut away the weeds. Keep a clean property. And if someone tags your building, clean it as soon as possible.

Otherwise, Shaff said, more taggers will flock to the site.

“It’s worth doing right away,” she said, “or it’s a sign that no one cares, so go for it.”

Even if the abatement murals don’t really prevent graffiti, artists say that doesn’t mean they aren’t worth doing. The city still benefits from the community art that highlights Oakland’s diverse cultural history, Mundo said.

At least some of the council members apparently agree, but they’re just late starting.

“I’m guilty of being late on that, like some others,” Councilman Dan Kalb said. His office will release a request for proposals soon, he said.

New Councilwoman Anne Campbell Washington’s staff is working to process the grants that Mayor Libby Schaaf’s staff approved last year. Schaaf was the former councilwoman for Washington’s district before she was elected mayor.

And Councilman Abel Guillen, another new face on Oakland’s council, has several grants for projects on an upcoming council agenda.

Even Reid said flatly that he “doesn’t like murals,” but he is considering a project for his East Oakland district.

Many in his district would appreciate the assistance.

John Henry, who operates the barbershop at 9512 International Blvd., said he had problems with taggers until he allowed artists to do work on his building.

Now the taggers avoid his building, and his new artwork — which also advertises his business — has taken its place.

“It was definitely a problem for me,” Henry said. “I don’t love it (the art on his building), but at least it says \$10 hair cuts.”

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