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FOR INFORMATION CALL

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Aldermen Outraged At Judge's Light Sentences For Graffiti Vandals

Council Members Say Judge's Sentences a "Slap in the Face" to Residents; Will Urge Citizens to Recreate Court Watch Initiative

A group of brazen graffiti vandals who gained notoriety after one of them scaled a freeway sign over I-94/I-43 and spray painted a tag while traffic zoomed below him received surprisingly light sentences in a Milwaukee County courtroom earlier this month.

In fact, the sentences issued by Circuit Court Judge William Sosnay on September 13 for seven members of the "WR Crew" have infuriated Ald. Tony Zielinski and Ald. Bob Donovan, who represent neighborhoods where crew members regularly honed their graffiti techniques. "Instead of protecting Milwaukee residents Judge Sosnay came down on the side of these taggers by giving them a slap on the wrist," said Ald. Zielinski, chair of the Council's Anti-Graffiti Policy Committee.

"I can tell you that our police officers did an outstanding job and invested a great deal of time and resources in cracking this case, and for this judge to let the taggers off easy is a slap in the face to all Milwaukee residents," Ald. Zielinski said.

According to police, nearly a dozen people were arrested in connection with the WR Crew's graffiti activities on the city's south side, on the east side and in Riverwest. A search warrant action in Riverwest connected to the case received media coverage after Mayor Tom Barrett went along and observed officers looking for evidence and making arrests. Damage caused by the crew totaled in the tens of thousands of dollars, and police resources spent on the case totaled "well in excess of \$100,000," Ald. Zielinski said.

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Light Sentences For Taggers/ADD ONE

However, despite recommendations for jail time plus extended probation from the Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office, on September 13 Judge Sosnay of Bayside sentenced none of the seven WR Crew defendants – including two charged with felonies – to actual straight jail time. Instead, the judge gave the defendants Huber sentences allowing them to leave a jail dormitory daily to go to school and/or work. In addition, the defendants were ordered to pay restitution, and each was given 250 hours of community service and probation.

At sentencing the crew's alleged leader, Samuel Guerrero, faced a total of 76 months in prison on more than a dozen counts, including one felony. However, after Guerrero pleaded guilty to the felony and seven misdemeanor graffiti charges, Sosnay sentenced him to just one year of Huber time at the House of Correction, \$11,546 in restitution plus four years probation.

Ald. Donovan said one of the defendants was picked up on suspicion of graffiti vandalism on September 15 – just two days after the sentencing. “If that (defendant) had been given jail time I can almost guarantee you he wouldn't have been out there defacing property,” he said. “It's just unbelievable.”

“Graffiti makes people scared and it labels a neighborhood as ‘undesirable,’ and that's why this (sentencing) by Judge Sosnay is so outrageous and unacceptable,” said Ald. Donovan, who serves as a member of the Anti-Graffiti Policy Committee.

Ald. Donovan said he is working with the Southside Organizing Committee to recreate a “court watch” group whose members will attend court hearings and sentencing hearings to provide victim impact statements and testimony. “It's clear that Judge Sosnay doesn't live in a neighborhood where residents and business owners fear the psychological terror and physical property damage of graffiti on a daily basis, but I believe he would issue sentences differently if he heard from people who have to live with graffiti far too often,” he said.

According to police, charged in the WR Crew case along with Guerrero were: Daniel Gavinski; Jesus Vargas; Alain Lovaco-Vinigra; Jason Grosso; Edwin Menting; Daniel Arteaga; and Andrew Szejna. Sentencing for Lovaco-Vinigra is set for October 10.