

Neighborhood beautification plan includes facelift for garbage bins

Neighborhood beautification plan

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OAKLAND -- Trash cans and beauty don't usually go hand in hand, but in Fruitvale and other city neighborhoods they are becoming synonymous. From Jack London Square's warehouse district to Fruitvale's International Boulevard, city trash cans are getting a facelift aimed at bringing a sense of community and cleaner streets to the neighborhood.

"The idea of making a trash can beautiful is kind of ironic," said Christine Lebron, project manager at Fruitvale Main Street. "But any little thing helps. It makes the district more attractive and shows that there are people in the community who care."

Thousands of dollars are spent each year in hopes of cleaning city streets. Litter is a top concern among many in Oakland -- so much so that the city spent more than \$180,000 on an anti-littering campaign to curb the amount of litter on city streets.

But the impact of getting a new trash can on a city street can be enhanced, trash can decorators and city planners say, by making those cans appealing to the eye.

"It's kind of like a low-hanging fruit," said **Diana Williams**, executive director of **Urban Ecology**, a nonprofit land use planning group. "It's easy to get to and an easy place to start."

Those were two aspects discovered by Fruitvale Main Street when it embarked on a beautification program for the neighborhood's International Boulevard commercial corridor.

With the help of a city grant, artists from the California College of Arts and Crafts and a team of city high school students, Main Street devised a plan to brighten-up the 33 trash cans along the vibrant commercial strip.

The artists came up with designs to illustrate the neighborhood's diverse cultures, and the students helped paint designs on the cans.

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"It's attaching beauty to something that is usually considered ugly," said Allison Wilson, who joined the program in 2001 and is now its director. "It just brightens up the streets and people's mentality."

And it also creates a sense of community, helping neighborhoods develop an image and distinct boundaries.

"It helps identify a historic neighborhood, and you can throw trash in there, too," said Gary Knecht, a member of the Jack London Square Neighborhood Association, which spent years developing trash cans for the area's warehouse district. "We wanted to celebrate the historic importance of the waterfront warehouse district and clean up the streets ... we figured out how to combine those two goals in a trash receptacle."

While Fruitvale's trash can program uses existing cans for its artistic displays, the Jack London Neighborhood Association developed their own can designs. Those designs include plaques that tell the story of a historic building close to the trash can.

No matter how a can is beautified, its impact on the community is significant, Williams said.

"It can make city services more relevant to people," she said. "No longer is the can a part of an anonymous city bureaucracy, it is something people feel belongs to them."

And that translates into caring for a neighborhood that might otherwise have been neglected.

Rarely has one of the cans in Fruitvale been destroyed by graffiti. Wilson said many business owners in the area are begging the group to paint the cans in front of their stores.

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