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Saukville man, 51, nabbed by Port police after trying to destroy tree on Franklin Street in front of tavern patrons

Port Washington police, who began a crackdown on downtown vandalism this past weekend, arrested a 51-year-old Saukville man early Saturday for trying to destroy a tree on Franklin Street.

The man was one of two people arrested and three cited for various violations during the expanded downtown patrols, according to police.

Seven trees in downtown have been destroyed by vandals this summer, frustrating residents, merchants and police and prompting the crackdown.

“I feel really good about this,” Police Chief Richard Thomas said. “We are not going to tolerate anyone damaging our beautiful downtown.”

The Saukville man was arrested about 2:20 a.m. Aug. 28 after two officers saw him bending over a gingko tree in the 200 block of North Franklin Street, according to police.

Lt. Eric Leet, one of the officers who witnessed the incident, said the man had been at a downtown tavern and was intoxicated. He didn’t offer a reason for his actions, Leet added.

“The explanation he offered was that he didn’t do it,” Leet said.

The man wasn’t shy about his actions, he added.

“The street was full of people,” Leet said. “It was probably witnessed by 40 to 50 bar patrons leaving downtown.”

That may work in the city’s favor, Leet noted.

“These people got to see a guy pulling on a tree arrested. To me, that would make an impact,” he said.

Police have asked the Ozaukee County district attorney’s office to charge the man with a misdemeanor count of attempting to destroy property, Thomas said.

“What a jerk,” Thomas said of the man.

If the district attorney declines to press charges because he does not believe he can meet the burden of proof required, Thomas said, police will issue the man a municipal citation for attempted damage to property. Municipal citations do not require the same burden of proof as a criminal charge.

That same hard-line stance will be followed for anyone who commits or tries to commit vandalism downtown, Thomas said.

“One way or another, they will be held accountable,” he said.

Misdemeanor charges of disorderly conduct have been requested against the other man arrested early Saturday. The 27-year-old Port Washington man was screaming and tipping over construction barricades at the intersection of Wisconsin Street and Grand Avenue about 12:30 a.m., police said.

In addition, three men were cited for open intoxicants during the early hours of Saturday and Sunday. One of the men was also cited for littering.

Leet said police have adjusted their traditional north and west patrol areas so that each one overlaps downtown on weekend evenings, allowing these officers to spend time downtown.

He also patrolled downtown, as did the bike patrol officer, all of whom were visible to people downtown, Leet said.

“There were times this weekend when we had two squads downtown as well as (the bike patrol officer),” he said. “We wanted to make a point. I, like everyone else in town, get tired of seeing the trees destroyed.”

In addition to the increased police presence, he said, two reserve police officers were posted in

downtown storefronts conducting surveillance Friday and Saturday nights. If they saw anything suspicious, they radioed the officers on duty.

"We didn't want to give up completely on our visible presence," he said, noting that it is an effective way to prevent problems. "We'd rather prevent (actions) than catch (violators after the fact), but if we can't prevent, we'll settle for catching."

The crackdown will continue as officers are available until the vandalism abates, Leet said.

"Until we start to see signs the patrons down there are willing to act responsibly, we'll have to keep this up," he said, noting that the program will be evaluated in a month.

"We never like to have to do the zero-tolerance thing. Discretion is part of good policing. But what we've been doing so far hasn't been working, so this is the next logical step."

Thomas said the department is in the process of creating signs for downtown businesses to post warnings of the crackdown and the fact police are watching for vandals.

In addition, he said, the city has ordered special tree guards to place around the trees near Schooner Pub and Foxy's, where most of the trees have been broken this year, in an attempt to protect them.

In addition, anyone who witnesses vandalism is encouraged to report it via the city's new vandalism hotline at 268-7682. A $50 reward is offered for tips leading to the arrests of vandals.

Both Leet and Thomas praised business owners who have offered their storefronts for surveillance.

"We've got to give the business community a big hand," Thomas said.

FRUSTRATED WITH THE wanton destruction of trees along Franklin Street in downtown Port Washington, such as this gingko that was destroyed by vandals Aug. 14, police increased their night patrols beginning last weekend. It paid off when early Saturday, they arrested one man who officers say was trying to break a tree in the 200 block of Franklin Street.
Photo by Bill Schanen IV