

Dangerous & Unsightly Amendment to HRM Charter

Graffiti Issues

May 2011

Introduction

HRM wishes to present considerations regarding the dangerous & unsightly amendments before the Committee, and request the inclusion of "graffiti" in the definition of "dangerous and unsightly." HRM wants to be able to help citizens work towards a safer, cleaner and more welcoming community. Our objective is to assist residents in removing graffiti as quickly as possible and reduce its recurrence in the long term. To do this, we ask that "graffiti" be explicitly included in the definition of "dangerous and unsightly," to allow HRM to fully implement its graffiti removal plan.

Graffiti as a Social Problem

Graffiti is a growing problem in HRM – growing both in number of incidents and in that it leads to other anti-social behaviours such as drug use, theft and assault. According to Halifax Regional Police statistics, the majority of graffiti taggers are younger adults with serious behavioural problems. Of the 111 known graffiti taggers in HRM, 94% have had other related incidents with police. Graffiti is considered a "gateway" crime as it leads to other, more serious problems. The "broken windows" theory outlines how the perception of disorder in an area can result in actual disorder, because it projects an impression that no one cares, there is contempt for the law, and the sense of social obligation is eroded. Graffiti results in urban blight because it projects an image of an uncontrolled and potentially unsafe area. Studies have found that one of the primary aims of taggers is to achieve recognition of their "work," and so the best way to prevent the spread of graffiti is to remove it almost immediately. Studies show that timely removal of graffiti – ideally within 24-28 hours - reduces the chance of re-occurrence to 10%. Therefore the cornerstone of any graffiti removal plan is a speedy clean-up of the affected area.

Impact on Citizens

Graffiti affects residents and business-owners. Areas where graffiti is present show a general increase in crime rates and a decrease in property values. It fosters social withdrawal and intimidates people from walking in the area. There is less sense of community, decreased use of public spaces, and increased fear. In some areas of HRM, there is anecdotal evidence of homes that have been tagged being associated with subsequent break-and-enters. Graffiti particularly impacts those who may have trouble removing it themselves – such as seniors or residents with reduced mobility. They are forced to arrange for a private contractor to come remove it – at their own cost. Until the contractor is available, the property owner in these cases must live with the graffiti, which in turn encourages other taggers to

vandalize their property, creating a continuing pattern of urban blight. Often the same spots are targeted time and again.

HRM Graffiti Removal Initiative

In 2006 Council adopted a Graffiti Management Plan, focused on education, eradication and empowerment. To date HRM has undertaken several steps to limit the negative impacts of graffiti, such as the provision of free graffiti removal kits for residents, community paint-outs and clean ups, and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) audits to reduce the incidence of graffiti hits. A Graffiti Task Force was established to oversee the Plan's implementation, with many external organizations, such as HRSB, Canada Post, NSPI, and Aliant. All members take an active role in removing graffiti from their properties.

However private property owners do not always have the same ability to remove graffiti in a timely manner, so the problem gets worse. While virtually all property-owners do remove any graffiti eventually, home and business owners do not have easy access to maintenance resources which tend to be costly. This is why HRM provides free removal kits. We now want to provide further assistance to residents who may not be able to undertake the removal of graffiti themselves – by having the ability to remove the graffiti ourselves.

While HRM cannot donate taxpayer dollars to private property maintenance, we can undertake work if a cost-recovery mechanism is in place. Because the purchasing power of a municipal government is much greater than that of individuals, HRM could undertake a cost-effective graffiti removal service for properties where the owner cannot quickly or easily do it themselves. This initiative will have two positive outcomes:

- Assisting and empowering citizens in creating clean, safe and welcoming neighbourhoods
- The prompt removal of graffiti, thus greatly reducing its spread and re-occurrence.

HRM plans to undertake an educational campaign prior to commencing any graffiti removal program. It would aim to educate the public about the seriousness of graffiti as a quality-of-life and safety issue, and let them know how they can reach out for assistance. Should the cost-recovery aspect present problems for some residents, HRM will still provide removal kits, and will also make them aware of the right to a free appeal at the dangerous & unsightly committee to ask for assistance. HRM wants to encourage citizens to take action and enlist public help in eradicating graffiti – making them partners in developing a safer, cleaner and greater city.