

Recently a Police Detective, the Manager of Community Response and I (as Chair of HRM's Graffiti Task Force) went to New York City to investigate their approach to stopping graffiti vandalism in their communities. We had a jam packed agenda, meeting with many different people and organizations that are involved in this issue. They call graffiti a quality of life issue and it falls under their City-wide Vandals Task Force. In NYC graffiti is treated as a crime and any offenders that are caught can face jail time. Recently a 26 year old man was arrested, sentenced to six months in jail, a \$25,000 fine and four and a half years of probation. Although our laws are not as tough and aren't enforced as much as the United States, there are still many effective solutions that we can implement.

Community buy-in was important for NYPD's successes. The first step we need to take is to have the public, Police and the courts recognize that graffiti is a crime and report it. NYPD gave us a report for graffiti crimes for one week, it was half the size of our phone book. They report it and arrest people for the crime. They also emphasized that as soon as it appears, you have to remove it, or it keeps coming back. We need laws to combat graffiti to ensure that business and residential property owners remove graffiti. We are currently compiling a bylaw. There were some great programs whereby NYC assisted in the removal, which I would like to see in HRM. I am consulting with legal and HRM staff to see if we can do this. It is important to make it easy for people to remove graffiti. As well, we need to either encourage or force businesses that sell graffiti instruments to not display or sell them to minors so that graffiti implements are not readily available to youth.

NYC has learned many lessons in its fight on graffiti and we can benefit from their experience. We saw areas in NYC where some building owners allow people to paint murals anywhere on the building. Vehicles and even the green bins were tagged. You could see adjacent buildings that tried to remove the graffiti but couldn't keep up with the vandalism. The whole community was full of debris, litter and looked like no one cared about it. In NYC free walls absolutely contributed to neighbourhood decline. It costs them 10's of millions of \$ to remove graffiti. Last year in HRM it cost us \$2 million just to remove graffiti off municipal properties. Even if we are vigilant in removing it, if a neighbouring property owner doesn't remove it, the vandals will keep coming back.

One of the big mistakes that I made here in HRM was to agree to give the graffiti vandals a "free wall" at the former B C Silver School, that they could legally paint in exchange for them staying away from business and residential properties. HRM did a blitz and cleaned the Herring Cove Road of graffiti. At first the area was kept clean but then it got pounded by graffiti from the vandals tagging buildings on their way to and from the free wall. Fortunately this building has been torn down and we are not giving any more free walls.

NYC also does not recommend murals as they proved to increase graffiti vandalism in an area. In HRM murals used to be respected but most of them are now being tagged. Last week I called in a couple that had profanity painted on them and many were tagged with hate graffiti. Large murals like the Sir Sandford Fleming mural are

considered community art, not a graffiti deterrent and are clean so far. I will be talking to external stakeholders such as Aliant and recommending that the money from their mural program would be better used for prompt removal of graffiti.

The City Wide Vandals Task Force is something that I will be recommending for HRM. A group specifically addressing these issues would be more effective, similar to how our traffic division has successfully focused on traffic and safety issues. There is a wealth of information out there that links vandalism such as graffiti to other collateral crime. It may start with graffiti but eventually this escalates and the end result is a high crime rate, which we have now. Although our violent crime rate has decreased over the past few years, we still have the one of the highest rate of youth crime and in particular violent youth crime which is increasing significantly each year.

NYPD advertises to residents that they should report graffiti immediately, remove it immediately from their properties, maintain or improve property lighting and natural landscaping and stress the importance of respecting public and private property to youth. Public education is something we have not done, but we have an opportunity to enhance awareness. NYC has the same 911 system as we do for emergencies, but they also a 311 system for all other enquiries. This is much easier to remember than our 490-4000 call centre and other HRM numbers we use. The 311 system can also highlight trouble spots more efficiently for NYPD. HRM has done some research on this issue and I will be recommending we implement the 311 system as soon as possible. NYC have a graffiti rewards program which could be another effective tool for us. In their fight to "reclaim public spaces" NYPD and many municipal departments and community groups work together to combat graffiti. I am encouraged that there are many options for us to adapt these programs to address graffiti and quality of life issues in Halifax.