



City of
Vaughan
The City Above Toronto

Erase Graffiti: Vaughan's anti-graffiti approach



“Right now I don’t know how big a problem it is, but if it ever grows it will turn out to be very serious. So now might be a good time to nip it in the bud.”

Vaughan resident in questionnaire

Executive Summary

Nip it in the bud. That old truism is the rationale behind the City of Vaughan’s aggressive development of an anti-graffiti bylaw and public education campaign called Erase Graffiti in 2008-9. The campaign was prompted by the increasing appearance of graffiti to City staff in the five communities of Vaughan; the cost to deal with it; and the proactive leadership of the Safe City Committee in Vaughan.

One of the key elements of the campaign was a Community Questionnaire Survey. It was felt that input from the community defining their perceptions of the scope of the problem would be key in developing the public education campaign and the bylaw.

The survey began in Fall 2008 and wrapped up in spring 2009. Both online and mailed-in submissions were received.

Results

Just under 40 per cent of respondents said that graffiti was a serious problem. Even so, almost two thirds said that an anti-graffiti bylaw would help in reducing incidents of graffiti.

More than 75% were in favor of a hotline (which exists); and almost the same percentage supported the City having the authority to remove graffiti from private property (residential, commercial and industrial).

Almost two thirds were in favor of property owners being required to remove graffiti from their property. This was critical information for the bylaw as it substantiated the direction that the bylaw finally took. When asked if they would be in support of a reward system to encourage residents and business owners to report graffiti offenders, almost 75% said yes.

The role of graffiti as art was favored by almost three quarters of residents, as long as it was in designated areas (murals).

On the enforcement side, when asked whether Vaughan City Council should allocate resources to control graffiti, vandalism and promote community safety, more than 80 per cent agreed. When asked if they were in support of a permit system for businesses that wished to allow graffiti on their property, more than half said no. When asked if they had further comments, 77% said no.

The Community and The Problem

"I once saw a swastika on a lamp-post. I was horrified."

Vaughan resident

Vaughan is a safe and beautiful community. It has been recognized and won awards provincially, nationally and internationally for its Communities in Bloom participation. It has been touted by Canadian Family magazine as the fourth "Best and Coolest Place to Raise a Family". It is also a fast-growing community of 270,000 (in 2009), a city that leads Canadian municipalities greater than 100,000 in population growth. Such growth exerts pressures to maintain both safety and beauty. It is known that graffiti can both breed graffiti and reduce property values, encourage criminal behaviour, discourage business investment and create a climate of citizen anxiety.

Given its rapid growth, it can be estimated that the incidence of graffiti will rise in Vaughan if left unattended. While the problem may now be seminal in Vaughan, and survey results show that resident perception is that the problem is not yet serious, proactive management is still considered, by residents and experience in other jurisdictions, the most effective approach. That is why the City has chosen to take leadership through a community-driven response that is both strategic and tactical.

Costs

As of Fall 2008 approximately \$50,000 had been spent on clean-up of graffiti by the Public Works and Parks departments of the City of Vaughan. Wards 4 and 5 have the highest incidence of graffiti in the city.

Given the pressure on Vaughan to maintain core services such as water distribution and road and park maintenance without undue tax increases, these costs represent money better spent on core services. In addition, if the problem is not addressed the amounts can be expected to increase in coming years. Across Canada, municipalities have faced \$1 billion in total graffiti costs in recent years (Toronto Star).

It is also important to remember what these costs do not take into account. Consider the issue, for example, in term of staff time better spent. Enforcement activities help make Vaughan safe. Enforcement Officers, for example, conduct random inspections to ensure that vehicles owners and operators meet the requirements under the City of Vaughan licensing By-law. Time addressing graffiti issues necessarily means stress to address all the enforcement issues that face a modern city such as Vaughan.

With all these factors in mind Vaughan has chosen a zero tolerance philosophy that combines an effective bylaw and a comprehensive public education campaign.

A bylaw that works: the multi-lateral response

“We are using a ‘positive’ discipline approach by enhancing education and communication, and a ‘negative’ discipline approach to erase graffiti as soon as it appears and move towards zero tolerance.” Councillor Bernie DiVona

In 2008, in addition to the public survey, a multi-department team met to begin drafting the anti-graffiti bylaw and to develop the public education campaign. This involved researching best practices; assessing standard operating procedures for a bylaw that would work for the public and the City; estimating the current number of incidents and costs of graffiti; consideration of best practices in graffiti removal and development of a public education campaign that involved the public, media, business, City staff, politicians and other partnerships in order to ensure success.

The multi-department approach has helped forge an effective bylaw process that was approved by Council in Spring 2009. When graffiti is found on City property, the relevant department is responsible for taking pictures of the graffiti and taking pictures and collecting information such as size and location. That department is also responsible for removing the graffiti. The information is put into an Incident Report Form, which is forwarded to Enforcement Services. Enforcement Services opens a file for potential bylaw charges and forwards serious cases to York Regional Police.

With private properties, Enforcement staff enforce on both a complaint and proactive basis. Enforcement staff undertake inspections and issue Notices to Comply, directing removal within a specified time. Charges might also result. But the purpose of this strategy is to promote the public interest and not punish the property owner. Staff would assist the community, neighbourhood groups and agencies in supplying information with their graffiti removal endeavors.

Development of the Public Education Campaign

The survey was key to the public education campaign. In addition, outreaches to media were taken by the Safe City Committee that resulted in articles. As a next phase in public education, an information brochure and posters were developed. The message: Vaughan is a safe and beautiful community and residents have a role in keeping it both beautiful and safe by eliminating graffiti. To deliver that message to every household in Vaughan, the brochure was sent out with the semi-annual recreation catalogues in January 2009, thus saving time and money. In addition the brochures have been circulated with a local newspaper, later in the winter of 2009. The brochures were also distributed to all City facilities. Partners in the project included the CrimeStoppers of York Region and the York Catholic Board of Education.

In addition an anti-graffiti website was developed for the City website. Communication to City staff (approximately 900) has also taken place through the internal Intranet called the VIBE.

Next Steps

“Get rid of it as fast as it happens.”

Vaughan resident

The 2009 Annual Success Report, the City’s annual report to residents, will refer to the anti-graffiti campaign. Following are some other proposed initiatives, both internal and external:

1. Proactive media relations (calling the media) once we see how the bylaw is working
2. Another mention on the VIBE: what employees can do to prevent graffiti
3. A short article for the Economic Development publication Business Link
4. A short article for the Corporate Communications channel E-Blast (4,000 stakeholders)
5. Inserts in Councillor newsletters with update on how the campaign is working
6. Periodic elementary and high school visits by Mayor/Councillors
7. Engagement of Youth Councillor (once appointed) and Youth Cabinet as anti-graffiti ambassadors
8. An Anti-Graffiti Day, incorporated into existing City public clean-ups (e.g. 20 minute makeovers)

9. Work with the library as a resource for an anti-graffiti campaign targetted at young people
10. Mention in Councillor speaking engagements within the community, as appropriate



A Summit on Graffiti

In conversations with the City of Vaughan, the Town of Aurora has expressed interest in the idea of a summit on graffiti. This could potentially involve all the municipalities in York Region.

Outreaches to the other eight municipalities can be conducted to assess their level of interest and Vaughan could host such a summit. Bringing together the people behind the anti-graffiti initiatives across Canada's fastest growing region, together with experts in the field could bring great benefits. This might present as a significant opportunity for 2010, especially as Vaughan will be moving into its new Civic Centre later in that year.

In other municipal jurisdictions (e.g. Denver, Colorado), summits such as this have generated positive results. These included strategies for speedier removal of graffiti and successful public education initiatives.

In short, intelligence shared is power.

City of Vaughan Community Questionnaire on Graffiti

1. Do you think that graffiti is a serious problem in the City of Vaughan?

Sixty-two per cent said no. Thirty-seven per cent said yes. One per cent were not sure. The answer should be seen in the context of overall responses to the survey, which support vigilance and putting measures in place to ensure graffiti does not become a community problem.

2. Do you think an Anti-Graffiti By-law would help in reducing incidents of graffiti?

Sixty-four per cent said yes, thirty-six per cent no. This indicated a majority understand the connection between bylaw enforcement and incidence of graffiti and thus taking a proactive stance against it.

3. Are you in support of a City of Vaughan graffiti phone hotline?

Seventy-eight per cent were in favour of this, twenty-two per cent against. The line actually exists but requires frequent promotion now that the bylaw has been passed.

4. Should the City of Vaughan have the authority to remove graffiti from private property (residential/commercial/industrial)?

Seventy-eight per cent were in favour of the City having authority to remove graffiti from private property and twenty-two per cent were against. This is seen as a legitimate exercise of the City's authority to maintain public safety.

5. Are you in support of property owners being required to remove graffiti from their property?

Sixty-four per cent were in favour of property owners being required to remove graffiti and thirty-six per cent against. This is an encouraging statement of civic responsibility, complements the idea of a bylaw and supplements City authority with personal initiative.

6. Would you be in support of a reward system to encourage residents and business owners to report graffiti offenders?

Seventy-three per cent said no and twenty-seven per cent said yes. This large percentage is consistent with the consensus view that citizens must take personal responsibility for their property and have a key role to play in public safety.

7. Would you support designated areas for graffiti art (murals) in the City of Vaughan?

Seventy-five per cent said yes and said no. Interestingly, graffiti art is seen to have a place. Comments suggested designating mural areas and having periodic art displays in the new City Centre.

8. Should Vaughan City Council allocate resources to control graffiti, vandalism and promote community safety?

Eighty-one per cent said yes and nineteen per cent said no. Clearly this supports the role of the City in public safety and connects graffiti to the larger issue of community safety.

9. Are you in support of a permit system for businesses that wish to allow graffiti on their property?

Fifty-six per cent are not in favor of a permit system for businesses to allow graffiti on their property, forty-four per cent were. One comment suggested that, "How would the content of the graffiti be approved? Some strip malls would be quite unsightly if it's allowed on such a broad scale."

10. Do you have other comments in relation to the graffiti program?

Seventy-seven per cent had no further comments.