

Stopping the

suburban scrawl



Graffiti is not only unsightly, unless it is removed quickly it attracts more graffiti and promotes other forms of vandalism and crime, says Victorian Shadow Minister for Local Government, Leonie Burke.

“Out-of-control graffiti frightens people – especially the elderly,” Ms Burke says.

“People see the deterioration in their territory and feel intimidated. And council vandalism bills are skyrocketing.”

Victorian anti-graffiti pressure group RAGE (Residents Against Graffiti Everywhere) agrees. Based in Melbourne’s outer south-east, RAGE has more than 300 members and has been lobbying councils and the State Government to take a tougher stance on graffiti.

Its promotional material cites the ‘Broken Windows’ theory developed by US academics JQ Wilson and GL Kelling.

This theory argues that vandalism spreads in response to signals that no one cares. It may lead to increased levels of other crimes, but even in cases where this does not occur, widespread graffiti and other vandalism create perceptions that an area is unsafe, making residents feel less secure and more fearful.

Wilson and Kelling suggest this leads to people avoiding the streets and having less contact with others, thus reducing community bonds and increasing individuals’ social isolation. This will make neighbourhoods more vulnerable to crime, hurt local businesses, lower property values and threaten rate bases, according to this theory.

The RAGE strategy, which draws on studies of local governments in Australia and overseas, aims at councils eradicating all existing graffiti in their municipalities before setting up:

- n a hotline to receive reports of graffiti attacks;
- n a contract team to remove graffiti within 24 hours;
- n a database of graffiti ‘tags’ to identify repeat offenders;
- n police and schools database assistance; and
- n surveillance cameras in hotspots.

Graffiti is a big problem with no easy solution.

STEVE ROTHERHAM reports.

RAGE began in the City of Casey, where its founder, Steve Beardon, lives. But the first Victorian council to adopt a program similar to RAGE’s prescription was the City of Stonnington, and its main instigator was Ms Burke, whose electorate includes this municipality.

Stonnington has been trialling the program since last October and the results so far are encouraging, with an apparent drop in graffiti incidents, Ms Burke says.

Now Casey, in response to RAGE’s advocacy and Stonnington’s apparent success, has implemented much the same program.

City of Casey CEO Mike Tyler says while removing graffiti from private property is not a council responsibility, Casey will have graffiti removed at its expense from visible private and council-owned areas across the municipality within 24 hours of discovery.

“The City will be cleaned up and an ongoing removal and monitoring program will begin in conjunction with local police,” Mr. Tyler says.

The contractors employed to remove the graffiti will also set up a council-owned database of tags to help identify repeat offenders. Police, other councils and government bodies will also have access to this database, says Casey’s contracts and compliance manager, Brendan Fitzsimmons.

“We want to identify the people who do this and take strong action against them,” he says.

This could include legal action against repeat offenders. Casey will also investigate installing security cameras at areas considered to be constant targets for graffiti vandals.

The council has allocated \$300,000 in its 2001-2002 budget to tackle the problem.

A set up cost of \$300,000 or more would not be unusual for councils looking to implement RAGE’s recommendations, Mr. Beardon admits.

He agrees some councils would be put off by this initial cost, but says ratepayers would

have to pay only about an extra \$5 each annually.

“It’s not a lot of money to ask for to solve the graffiti problem especially if the program gives a boost to local property values and businesses,” he says.

Mr. Beardon says RAGE is now lobbying other councils to adopt its strategies, and hopes success in Stonnington and Casey will generate enthusiasm for the program in other council areas and within the Bracks government.

In NSW, Parramatta City Council is prepared to use legal means to tackle graffiti, but its program emphasises social and community programs.

Community development worker for youth, Melanie Pinnington says the council’s draft Graffiti Management Plan is designed to enable Council to adopt a whole-of-community approach to tackling illegal graffiti. Parramatta is currently implementing several strategies from the Plan even though it is still in a draft form.

Parramatta has a hotline for reporting graffiti and aims to remove it from public property within 48 hours of notification, or earlier if the graffiti is offensive.

For private property owners, the council currently offers two options: a free graffiti removal kit that enables owners to remove graffiti themselves or the Department of Juvenile Justice Graffiti Clean Up Scheme.

The clean-up scheme uses youths who have been convicted for minor offences, including graffiti vandalism, to clean up the graffiti.

Parramatta is also developing an Adopt-an-area Scheme, under which local communities ‘adopt’ particular areas and take responsibility for their maintenance.

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