

State-sponsored scribble fury

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THE Victorian Department of Justice gave a \$6700 graffiti grant to fund supervised spraying in a Highett park.

The "graffiti mural", painted by local youths last week, decorates the entrance to the Peterson St Youth Centre. Bayside City Council's website said if kids felt the urge to paint a building they could do it creatively and under the guidance of professional artists.

However the anti-graffiti lobby is outraged at the state-sponsored scribble.

Residents Against Graffiti Everywhere founder and spokesman, Casey councillor Steve Beardon, said yesterday "graffiti art" was still an eyesore.

"That money would be better spent on removing graffiti, because rapid removal is a deterrent," Cr Beardon said.

"Then we should encourage vandals who are apprehended to consider graphic arts or working in a panel beating shop, and getting an apprenticeship in car spray-painting."

Allowances of up to \$20,000 were made available to councils last year through the State Government's \$400,000 Preventing Graffiti Community Grants Fund.

A Department of Justice spokesman said the grants helped communities tackle the scourge.

Most of the \$1.2 million in anti-graffiti funding in last year's state budget had gone towards sentencing low-risk offenders to clean up graffiti, he said.

Some councils used the money for park lighting to deter vandals, and others planted thick rows of cactus in front of bare walls.

"Local people decide on the best anti-graffiti project for their neighbourhoods, and murals can be one way to cover ugly scribbles and prevent vandals returning," the spokesman said.

"The State Government is also cracking down on graffiti vandalism with tough new laws and stiffer penalties."

Anti-graffiti legislation will be brought before State Parliament this year.

Cr Beardon said sponsored graffiti walls had no impact on illegal tagging.

"It doesn't work. It is a green light from the Government who, on one hand say graffiti is a crime, and on the other say, 'Go for your life'," he said.

Casey reduced graffiti by introducing a tag database, which was monitored by local police, and also paid a private contractor to immediately remove unsightly scrawl from commercial and private property, Cr Beardon said.

Bayside Mayor John Knight could not comment yesterday but said in a statement on the council website: "This great project encourages young people to express their artistic skill in a positive way, by producing legitimate artwork for their community."

Cr Beardon said graffiti vandals were often teenagers with low self-esteem who needed rehabilitation and work opportunities.

Local police had a zero-tolerance policy to graffiti on private property, but Moorabbin Sgt Paul Baillie said they supported designated graffiti walls.

Opposition scrutiny of government spokesman Murray Thompson said grants would be better spent cleaning up.

"The Bracks Government has a double-minded approach to graffiti, supporting on the one hand a zero-tolerance policy while at the same time funding graffiti through the Department of Justice."