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Class for 'vandals' Council hosts graffiti artists program

By Aaron Langmaid

GRAFFITI bandits are being encouraged to express their artistic freedom under a ratepayer-funded program that endorses vandalism, campaigners say.

Anti-graffiti groups have slammed Port Phillip Council for hosting programs tailored to graffiti artists.

Despite walls, shops and alleys covered in unsightly graffiti, a stencil and sticker graffiti workshop for 12 to 19-year-olds has been promoted on the council's website.

Graffiti Hurts Australia chief executive Scott Hilditch said the workshops were an insult to residents and traders who battled to keep streets clean.

"They are basically telling minors it's OK to learn the art of graffiti," Mr Hilditch said. "The City of Port Phillip is actually supporting graffiti vandalism, not trying to eradicate it." But Mayor Janet Cribbes said the workshops were aimed at educating young people on appropriate and legal graffiti outlets. "We do not condone illegal graffiti," she said.

The council did not apply for funding for graffiti-cleaning supplies in the last round of State Government grants.

The criticism comes after the introduction of tough new laws for retailers caught selling spray paint to minors.

There are on-the-spot fines of more than \$2000, while under-18s caught with graffiti paraphernalia can also be fined.

Albert Park state Labor MP Martin Foley said residents were "sick and tired" of graffiti. Residents' Against Graffiti Everywhere founder **Steve Beardon** said the real solution was in a zero-tolerance approach.

Mr Beardon, a councillor for the City of Casey, said Port Phillip Council was considered "an absolute joke" in this area.

He said it must ban shop owners from displaying aerosol paint, hold awareness programs and establish a residents' hotline.

Cr Cribbes said the council spent more than \$200,000 in 2007-08 removing graffiti.

Caption: Examples of graffiti on the streets of Balaclava.

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