

Town's graffiti committee coming up with action plan for community

By Bill Rea

The establishment of a dedicated hotline should be effective in the fight against graffiti in Caledon.

That is the hope of the Town's Graffiti Advisory Committee, which made a report to Caledon council last week.

Councillors approved staff recommendations to come up with a graffiti eradication strategy, including the development of an easy process by which such incidents can be reported.

As well, council approved a one-year graffiti eradication pilot project, allocating \$10,000 from the Caledon OPP budget.

Speaking on behalf of the committee, retired Caledon OPP Sergeant Bob Patterson pointed out graffiti is a nagging, on-going problem, although it's not unique to Caledon and it's unlikely it can be eliminated.

He said the committee, which included representation from the community, council, OPP, Town staff, and the local school boards, has been working on a plan for reporting, responding to and following up on incidents of graffiti.

In terms of prevention, Patterson said education in schools has been going on for a couple of years, but it's possible to increase the emphasis on it. He added officers in the schools do talk about it. He also said they are looking at including information on graffiti with the crime-prevention displays at various community events, such as Caledon Day. There are also plans to use the local media, as well as liaise with partners, like Canadian Pacific, utilities, and commercial and industrial stakeholders.

He also stressed the importance of having a fast and accessible reporting mechanism.

Patterson pointed out OPP already has material on graffiti in its crime prevention section that could be directed to parents. It deals with such matters how they can recognize if their kids have been involved in this activity. Kids who are taggers will have their tags on just about everything they own (school bags, binders, etc.), so that's a link parents can look out for.

In terms of managing the problem, Patterson said the plans include assessing the damage and getting the tags removed efficiently and economically.

Making it easy to report these incidents is part of improving enforcement, Patterson said. The plan also includes aggressive enforcement, since graffiti is a crime, under the Criminal Code. They can also use the Ontario Provincial Offences Act to combat trespassing to get these people.

It can be a nice wake-up to a 15-year-old and their parents, he observed.

As well, he said Alternative Dispute Resolution (or restorative justice) can be useful in cases like this. Patterson agreed there are some who see the concept as being soft on crime, but he stressed it can leave a lasting impression on a 12-year-old; more than if they had to go through the court route.

In terms of analysis, Patterson said the plan includes on-going assessment to get a better understanding of why graffiti occurs, as well as tailoring solutions to meet the unique characteristics of the community. He said enforcing trespassing laws should be a good tool to reduce these incidents. More and more people are going home with tickets, he observed.

Patterson also pointed out graffiti can't be treated as an emergency. Having a garage door tagged does not merit calling 9-1-1, he said, unless the act is in progress.

It's serious, he said. It's aggravating as hell and we want to respond.

While it's important to report these incidents, Patterson stressed the importance of not removing the tags too quickly. Police need time to photograph it and gather other evidence. He added that if there is one tag repeated in several locations, the person responsible can be charged on a number of counts. It's harder to get a conviction if the damage is cleaned up too fast.

He suggested a minimum of 24 hours, but added the investigation usually won't take that long.

Developing a graffiti hotline that's manned all the time has advantages, Patterson said. An officer can be dispatched quickly and the Town can be informed.

Patterson said the message centre would be operated through a local company called Alternative Answers. He said they handle Crime Stoppers and they can be trusted to do a good job.

The cost of this line would be about \$400 per month, which means finding sources of funding. Patterson said that could be done through partnerships in the community, with service clubs and businesses, as well as exploring grant opportunities.

He also said the Town needs to act quickly. That includes having graffiti cleaned from Town properties fast to set an example. As well, there will be a need to review the property standards bylaw to support getting rid of graffiti, and the development of a communications plan.