

When the writing's on the wall

Graffiti has become a multimillion-dollar, chronic headache for building owners

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What's the difference between art and vandalism? If the eye of the beholder is a property owner or manager, the answer doesn't really matter -- graffiti, whether an artistic-looking mural or a scrawled, gang-related tag, is a costly nuisance.

In Calgary, "graffiti costs building owners and property managers \$10-million annually, and that's not counting city-owned properties," says Bill Partridge, executive vice-president of the Building Owners and Managers Association's Calgary chapter. While BOMA doesn't collect nationwide statistics on graffiti, "other major cities are likely close to Calgary," he estimates.

It's a nuisance that's not going away -- and building owners are under the gun as more municipalities enact bylaws that force them to remove graffiti.

"My buildings are tagged all the time," says John Alevras, a property manager with Crosby Property Management, which has properties scattered across British Columbia's Lower Mainland. "Usually, it's a word or initials -- the really ugly looking tags you see scrawled on buildings."

The overall strategy in dealing with it? "The longer you leave it up, the more times you'll get hit, so you have to remove it as quickly as possible," Mr. Alevras says.

But instead of rushing over with a bucket of "graffiti remover," he calls in **Goodbye Graffiti Inc.** and within a day the stain or etching is gone.

So, how big of a problem is graffiti? Ask Perri Domm, president and founder of Goodbye Graffiti, based in Vancouver, and he'll tell you it's "growing exponentially."

Mr. Domm started his company 10 years ago after finding there was a lack of graffiti-removal service for commercial property. "In the first seven months, we did 100,000 jobs, and by my second year, we were doing 350,000 buildings. Since then, the growth has been similar."

Goodbye Graffiti cleans 795 commercial buildings a week in Vancouver, and its branch offices handle about 4,000 buildings across Canada, a number that "is growing between 30 and 40 per cent annually," Mr. Domm says.

"It's just easier to call us up than to try and remove it yourself. I can look at a wall and know the exact brand of paint or marker used and how to get rid of it without leaving behind a shadow."

Each week, Mr. Domm's crews scour clients' buildings, photographing the graffiti before removing it. At the end of the month, Mr. Domm e-mails his clients images of the graffiti his company has removed. "People like us because they know we're going to get rid of [graffiti] as soon as we see it, and so it's not a pain for them."

His clients are charged a monthly flat rate, he says: "Five cents for a light pole to \$299 for a strip mall, if you're Cadillac Fairview."

Eighty per cent of Crosby Property Management's buildings have contracts with Goodbye Graffiti that are renewed yearly. "It costs about \$100 a year for a smaller building and up to \$300 for a large property," Mr. Alevras says. "The tenant pays this as part of the operating costs."

Cost is determined by the size of the building, the neighbourhood -- how likely it is a building will be tagged regularly -- and architectural details that make it difficult to clean the building.

Apart from the eyesore, there are more fundamental reasons why property owners want to keep on top of graffiti. Many municipalities have put the onus on them to get rid of it within a few days.

"Property owners are the victims here, and yet they're the ones who are fined," says John Kiru, executive director of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas, a city-controlled alliance with more than 22,000 small businesses and commercial property owners under its wing. The fines include the cleanup cost and can run more than \$150 per incident. "It's very frustrating. I don't think there's been an annual meeting when graffiti problems don't come up, and it seems to have gotten worse over the last eight years."

There are 60 business improvement areas in Toronto, and "each one tries to come up with creative ways of dealing with graffiti, from working with police to getting community volunteers to clean up the buildings," Mr. Kiru says. "It makes it look like the business owner doesn't care. It gives a perception of crime in the area and so it's safe to say it affects property value. By how much, I don't know."

As part of its Clean and Beautiful City initiative, Toronto is encouraging commercial property owners to remove "unsightly" graffiti by offering discounted paint and cleanup kits. The city will also help finance legal mural projects; as a last resort, city contractors will remove the graffiti at the owner's expense.

Some cities are becoming active on the issue. In 2005, London, Ont.'s city council ramped up the battle against graffiti by passing a spray paint bylaw: Anyone younger than 18 years of age can't purchase paint or other graffiti tools unless accompanied by a

parent or teacher. The bylaw, put in place by councillor Bernie MacDonald, was the first of its kind in Canada and is now in place in several cities including Calgary, Halifax and Montreal.

"It's starting to make a difference," Mr. MacDonald says. "Graffiti is a big problem in our city. I spoke with [former New York City mayor] Rudy Giuliani and he told me removing graffiti was the first thing he did to clean up New York. He said: 'Get rid of your graffiti and you'll get rid of your crime.' "

The age requirement on spray paint was chosen because most graffiti artists -- or vandals -- are younger than 17. "This is the Nintendo set," Mr. Domm of Goodbye Graffiti says. "It's the bored kid with the iPod who rides the bus into town and tags the nice areas. These are non-violent kids who see it as a sport or art form."

Of course, youths can always order paint on the Internet. A quick search brings up myriad graffiti supplies, including a paint and marker company called On The Run, which sells products specifically for making graffiti.

Rather than taking a negative approach, some property owners and municipalities promote graffiti, so long as the building owner requests it. The idea: Vandals won't tag a building with a large painting on it. In St. John's, city council gave up a few city-owned retaining walls for graffiti artists to paint whatever they wanted on. "At first, neighbours would see these people painting on the walls with suspicion," says Kay Anonsen, arts and cultural development co-ordinator for the City of St. John's. "But now they offer them cups of tea."