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The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Public Works
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

10 May 2010

Dear Madam

Submission by Parramatta City Council Re-Graffiti and Public Infrastructure Inquiry

Reference is made to the invitation for submissions on the impacts of graffiti on public infrastructure and also methods employed to protect public infrastructure from graffiti.

Parramatta City Council (PCC) is committed to providing a clean, vibrant, safe and welcoming atmosphere for all residents, workers and visitors within the Parramatta Local Government Area (LGA). As part of this commitment, PCC maintains a network of infrastructure to support the community and ensure the LGA presents in good repair and condition. This infrastructure is regularly subjected to vandalism in the form of graffiti, thus diminishing perceptions of Parramatta's amenity and safety and incurring considerable removal and maintenance costs to Council.

Graffiti management supports PCC's strategic goals to create neighbourhoods that are liveable and distinctive by improving perceptions of safety within the community, and the City Centre Crime Prevention Plan (2008-2013) strategy for responding to, and reducing, priority crime.

Historically, PCC has addressed the issue of graffiti vandalism in a variety of ways. PCC has, for example, assisted residents to remove graffiti from their properties by providing free graffiti removal kits, and has provided advice to businesses on how to reduce the likelihood of their property being targeted by graffiti vandals. PCC has instigated artistic diversion programs and approved funding for the establishment and maintenance of several 'legal walls' within the LGA in an attempt to provide manageable facilities that graffiti proponents could utilise with Council permission. PCC has also previously established a graffiti hotline telephone number, and has initiated a 'Dob In a Graffiti Vandal' campaign in the Lachlan Macquarie Ward of the LGA. Graffiti in the public domain has been removed generally as the result of information received via PCC's Customer Request Management (CRM) system, and by contractual arrangement with specific agencies. Removal has been facilitated by a combination of external contractors and PCC staff.

A review of graffiti management within Parramatta in 2009 suggested that PCC's past graffiti management practices had been insufficient to adequately address the issue of graffiti vandalism in the public domain, and several past initiatives have either exacerbated rather than alleviated the problem of graffiti vandalism, or have been proven ineffective in reducing the instances of new graffiti in large metropolitan and suburban areas.

Social and economic impact of graffiti on public infrastructure

The annual cost of graffiti vandalism to the residents of Parramatta LGA is substantial and has risen from \$287,217.03 in 2008/09 to almost \$600,000 in 2009/10. Part of this increase is accounted for by capital expenditure in the form of a purpose-built graffiti cleaning vehicle equipped with a soda blaster, coupled with increased operating costs to deploy that vehicle. Nonetheless, the recurrent cost of removing graffiti from public infrastructure within the LGA is increasing annually.

Apart from the economic impact of graffiti on public infrastructure, there is a considerable social impact as well. Despite drops in recorded crime within Parramatta LGA, Parramatta currently suffers from negative perceptions relating to crime and social order. While other issues contribute to these perception problems, a principal driver is a concentration of graffiti in some areas of the LGA.

Anti graffiti policies and practices to protect public infrastructure

PCC has a rapid removal policy for all graffiti on public infrastructure. Graffiti that is deemed racist, sexist, defamatory, inciting, threatening, politically inappropriate, vulgar or otherwise offensive is removed within 24 hours of such graffiti being identified or reported. PCC endeavours to remove all other graffiti within 48 hours of such graffiti being identified or reported.

PCC currently uses both staff and contractors to remove graffiti from Council property including; administration buildings, libraries, town halls, public toilets, community centres, open space buildings and infrastructure, roadways, footpaths, Council owned bridges, bus shelters and seats.

Service requests for graffiti removal are raised in PCC's online system via information from residents and staff. The Graffiti Teams also do regular inspections of 'graffiti hot spots' removing any graffiti in the one process. Graffiti removal is prioritised by location and offensiveness of the graffiti.

PCC has a partnership with State Rail and Holroyd City Council to share responsibility for graffiti removal in the Guildford and Merrylands rail passes. A contractor called ELCO International conducts fortnightly inspections of the public murals and walls of the Merrylands Train Station Underpass with removal of graffiti as required.

PCC also has an agreement with Integral Energy for ELCO International to conduct monthly inspections of two hundred and forty-one (241) Integral

Energy owned electricity boxes throughout the Parramatta CBD to remove graffiti as required at an annual cost of approximately \$18,000.

From October 2008 to mid-2009, PCC recorded information on graffiti removal in an Excel database, with digital photos supplied by PCC's Graffiti Removal Team and external contractors downloaded and stored within PCC's computer network. However this did not allow for any analysis of graffiti vandalism and this did not allow any sharing of information with New South Wales Police.

In late 2009 PCC purchased a license for the Australian Graffiti Register at a cost of approximately \$5000 per annum. While this system was an improvement over the previous use of an Excel spreadsheet, it does not deliver the benefits that it potentially could due to restrictive licensing. Only three logins are included with the annual subscription fee. Each additional login costs an extra \$500 per license. This reduces the effectiveness of the system in terms of information sharing and analysis. However, the Australian Graffiti Register has gained wide acceptance amongst local government agencies and does allow analysis of graffiti vandalism across LGA boundaries.

<http://www.ausgr.com.au/index.htm>

After an examination of the commercially available graffiti management systems, PCC will be switching to the GRIP system in June 2010 to track graffiti vandalism. While similar in some respects to the Australian graffiti register, GRIP will allow spatial analysis of graffiti crime through open source mapping, and appears to be a more cost-effective computer solution.

<http://www.gripsystems.org/>

PCC will also be conducting a 100% audit of graffiti within the LGA which is anticipated to be completed in June 2010. The audit will include photographing and geocoding all graffiti within the LGA, analysing graffiti tags and associations and entering the data into the graffiti database. This will provide PCC with a true picture as to the extent of graffiti throughout the LGA on both public infrastructure and private property and allow for proper analysis of graffiti vandalism i.e. how old is the graffiti, where is it occurring and who is committing the offences (graffiti tags).

PCC is currently considering the purchase of a small number of rapid deployment CCTV cameras. It is intended to deploy these cameras in hotspots identified through analysis of the graffiti database to obtain evidence to identify and prosecute graffiti vandals.

In short, PCC is focusing on addressing graffiti through proactive measures coupled with rapid removal from public infrastructure.

Anti graffiti practices such as mural painting programs employed by NSW state and local government agencies

PCC established and maintained six legal graffiti walls between 2004 and 2009 within the LGA. Such legal graffiti walls have been identified by NSW Attorney General's Department research as increasing rather than mitigating the problem of illegal graffiti vandalism within communities, particularly around the vicinity of the legal walls themselves. Issues such as inappropriate environmental designs and locations, and lack of PCC resources have all been seen to contribute to the failure of legal graffiti walls in reducing graffiti vandalism, however, it has also been identified that a key factor in the increase of illegal graffiti associated with legal walls is the exposure such walls give the public to this activity. Illegal graffiti 'art' is not the problem that Council is faced with, rather it is illegal graffiti 'tagging', and such legal walls, while catering for a small minority of genuine artists within the community, may inadvertently serve to promote graffiti to the wider non-artistically inclined community. Consequently, PCC took the decision to demolish the legal graffiti walls and this was carried out during the course of 2009.

Graffiti resistant finishes and other building materials suitable for public infrastructure

Council currently does not use protective coatings extensively as the chemical product utilised in this process is cost inhibitive (\$52.75 per litre which coats approximately 8-10 square metres). The use of protective coatings also increases subsequent graffiti removal costs as additional chemicals (\$20.80 per litre), high pressure equipment, and longer periods of time spent in the removal process are needed to remove graffiti from coated surfaces. Our submission is that Graffiti removal can be conducted significantly more efficiently and cost effectively on untreated surfaces.

Yours sincerely

Rob Williams
Community Crime Prevention Officer