



Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services



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MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Shannon Jones III, Director 

DATE: November 1, 2016

SUBJECT: Staff response to Resolution No. 20160804-056
Graffiti Abatement (CIUR 1797)

As directed by Resolution No. 20160804-056, a Graffiti Abatement Task Force was assembled to do the following: review the City of Austin's current graffiti abatement program's operations, make recommendations to the City Manager to develop an effective abatement program, identify best practices nationwide for addressing and preventing graffiti vandalism, and encourage positive expressions of public art.

City of Austin Departmental Graffiti Abatement Operations:

Austin 3-1-1:

All graffiti abatement requests are received via the Austin3-1-1 call center, mobile application, or email and routed to the appropriate department. Austin 3-1-1 works collaboratively to implement department business processes.

Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department (HHSD):

The Austin Youth Development (AYD) Program provides youth development services around personal development and employability skills for those who may have had limited opportunities and/or who are considered at risk, such as for not completing high school. The program's design includes educational and developmental activities within the year-long city work experience. The youth employees help maintain lawn service contracts and remove graffiti.

For more than 15 years, AYD has employed two teams, including two full-time supervisors and six temporary youth ages 17-22, to remove graffiti from public and private property, at no charge to the citizens or business owners (per City Ordinance 950325-K). The current budget for AYD graffiti program is \$500,350. The living wage increases adopted by the City Council had a significant impact on the AYD budget. As a result, staffing for Fiscal Year (FY) 2016-2017 has been decreased to two full-time supervisors and four temporary youth, despite the substantial population growth and increase in abatement requests.



Currently, there are 632 open service requests with approximately 17-20 service requests coming in daily. With a decrease in staffing, this will only get worse and citizen complaints will continue to escalate. Statistics indicate removal within 24 to 48 hours dramatically reduces the recurrences of graffiti vandalism. If AYD continues to be the default entity tasked with removing graffiti from public and private property throughout the city, additional staffing, resources, funding and support from other City departments will be critical.

Parks and Recreation Department:

The Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) use several methods to address graffiti on park land. Graffiti film, a thin layer of film that makes graffiti removal more manageable, has become standard on signage throughout the City's park system. For smaller jobs, PARC staff uses solutions similar to Arrow Magnolia RLP 9000 for graffiti removal. For more extensive graffiti issues that are beyond the capacity of PARC staff, work requests are sent to the Building Services Department (BSD) and back charged to PARC. Building Services will either assign this work to a vendor or utilize the HHSD AYD Program.

Between FY2011 and FY2014, PARC's average yearly cost of graffiti removal was approximately \$2,300. However, in FY2015, the cost rose to \$9,503.97, and is anticipated to go higher in the current fiscal year to approximately \$23,000. Most of the graffiti removal requests are generated during the summer months. The rise in cost can be closely tied to the perpetrators of the graffiti crimes targeting large areas such as skate parks and freshly painted/cleaned walls.

PARC has developed a draft Graffiti Abatement Plan for PARC staff which outlines the process and criteria for removing graffiti from metal, wood, plastic and masonry surfaces. The plan defines zones of work (Emergency, Priority, and Routine) which determine the timeline for graffiti removal. The plan also speaks to the treatment of historic structures.

Austin Transportation Department:

Various Divisions of the Austin Transportation Department (ATD) are alerted of graffiti-related service requests through Austin 3-1-1. The Signs and Markings and Signals Divisions replace or clean defaced street signs and clean signal cabinets; vandalized stop signs or other regulatory signs are placed as high priority and are maintained with urgency. The Right-of-Way Management Division redirects service request to Austin 3-1-1 for disbursement to the Austin Police Department (APD) or HHSD. The Parking Operations Division, cleans and/or repaints vandalized parking meters.

To help prevent future acts of vandalism, ATD is currently in the development stage of the "ArtBox Program", which is a pilot project on display along S. First Street between Elizabeth and Oltorf Streets. This pilot was conducted through the Economic Development Department's Art in Public Places TEMPO Program, which worked with the artists to create the art and contract with an installer. ATD facilitated the installation of the "vinyl wraps" by identifying potential signal box locations which are owned by ATD and preparing these boxes for

installation. Not only do the graffiti-resistant vinyl wraps make cleaning graffiti easier, but turning the blank traffic signal boxes to colorful public art is actually proven to deter graffiti and vandalism by promoting place making and sense of community pride.

Downtown Austin Alliance:

Block By Block Inc.'s Downtown Ambassadors contracted by the Downtown Austin Alliance provide enhanced cleaning, safety and hospitality outreach services to businesses and property owners within the boundaries of the downtown public improvement district within Cesar Chavez Street, I-35 frontage, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and (roughly) San Antonio.

They have 30 employees all involved in some level of graffiti abatement in the downtown district day and night seven days a week. Ambassadors will pull-down illegally posted handbills immediately, peel and scrape stickers from public infrastructure daily, and spray and wipe scribble tags as they are spotted. Larger graffiti will be called into a team leader who develops a daily removal list with the goal to remove or cover the graffiti within 12 to 24 hours. There is a special projects team that removes, covers with paint or power washes large tags the same day they are spotted.

When graffiti is discovered the service area (i.e. in Waller Creek, certain city parks, government or certain private properties), DAA notifies specific organizations (Community Court, PARD, property owners) and advocates for quick removal while offering additional resources.

Downtown Austin Community Court:

The Downtown Austin Community Court (DACC) engages in a restorative justice model in which offenders repay the community by performing community service restitution which is supervised by six Parks Grounds Crew Leaders employed by the court. DACC Crew leaders supervise defendants scheduled by DACC case managers, and individuals referred to the court by the Travis County Probation Department, and focus on projects within the court's jurisdiction and throughout the City of Austin. Under the close supervision of our CSR Crew Leaders, defendants and probationers will assist with the removal of graffiti by painting over the damage in locations throughout Austin. Requests for assistance received by this court come from HHSD AYD Program and the 3-1-1 system. Some examples of sites that have been serviced by the program are businesses properties (owners must sign a release), bridges (Waller Creek), waterways, park buildings, electrical/utility poles and traffic signs.

Building Services:

BSD provides graffiti abatement services to City-owned property via contract services. The majority of requests are driven by requests from PARD. As the manager of the graffiti abatement contract, BSD's Project Coordinator manages and authorizes the response and abatement with the vendor. BSD's Finance section provides the purchase orders and payment processing. Building Services has provided the quantity of work and dollar amounts for FY 2016, a consistent example of the volume and cost of this service. Three years of service averaged about \$132,818.49 per year.

Austin Code Department:

Austin Code Department has 34 residential districts with 29 code officers. When a code officer receives a complaint or sees existing graffiti while in the field, the officer alerts the appropriate department. APD is called when an officer sees graffiti in progress.

Austin Police Department:

Currently, the graffiti title code is assigned to APD sector detectives, and is handled as part of their regular case load. APD does not have dedicated resources or personnel assigned to graffiti abatement, nor a dedicated budget line item. Due to stretched resources, the work involved with graffiti case investigation was spread out to the sector detectives several years ago.

Additionally, APD District Representative units regularly perform community clean up days as part of their assigned duties, which at times involves graffiti removal. Also, APD's Office of Community Liaison (OCL) and District Representatives administer the GREAT program (Gang Resistance Education and Training), which also looks to reduce graffiti.

APD has no other assigned duties at this time related to graffiti abatement.

Art in Public Places:

The Art in Public Places (AIPP) program operates within the Cultural Arts Division of the Economic Development Department. The program must mitigate graffiti while caring for the public art collection in place on City property and in City-owned facilities. AIPP does not have staff dedicated to graffiti abatement, nor is there a dedicated budget for dealing with graffiti. To reduce the impact of graffiti, AIPP works with artists during design and fabrication so that artworks are installed with graffiti-resistant coatings whenever feasible.

If a City-owned artwork gets tagged, the AIPP Collection Manager is contacted to assess steps to deal with the problem before any remedial action is taken. Dependent on the type and severity of the tagging, the Manager can assist in one of several ways: provide removal advice to the facility management staff at the site where the tagged artwork is located; undertake removal, or cover over the graffiti personally; or contract with arts conservators to deal with the issue if it is particularly problematic. If there are any questions related to artwork (such as status of City ownership, methods or materials in question, removal process, documentation, etc.), AIPP staff can be contacted for guidance.

Successes/Accomplishments and Challenges:

Recently, the City of Austin has achieved some specific successes related to graffiti abatement and prevention. Some of the accomplishments the City has seen recently include:

- The recognition and generation of the task force by City Council Member Pool to review the Graffiti Abatement Program.
- Residents able to obtain free supplies to remove their own graffiti.
- Neighborhood Association partnership and participation.
- Implementation of 3-1-1 mobile application and service request development.
- Volunteer participation from various community organizations.

- In FY16 the AYD Program cleaned 473,677 square feet of graffiti.

Those accomplishments, while exciting and a step in the right direction, do not completely solve the issue of graffiti and vandalism in our community. Some of the challenges we still face include:

- HHSD AYD is funded for two crews operating 5 days per week, though abatement requests are received daily via 311. The average daily requests is 17 which creates an ongoing backlog.
- Clarity of problem / insufficient communication to the public.
- No sustainable solution.
- Insufficient budget, staffing and additional resources.

Recommendations and Best Practices (priority items are bolded):

Organizational and Funding

- **Priority 1:** Identify a Lead Department for Graffiti Abatement. Currently the City does not have one. HHSD Austin Youth Development Program by default is tasked with Graffiti abatement for the city with limited ability to address the vast needs of the ever growing community.
 - Examples of other cities' structural organization for graffiti abatement:
 City of Dallas and City of San Antonio: Department of Code Compliance
 City of Houston: Department of Neighborhoods, Inspections and Public Service
 City of Fort Worth: Park and Recreation Department
 San Jose, California: Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services
 Seattle, Washington: Seattle Public Utilities
 Portland, Oregon: Office of Neighborhood Involvement
- **Priority 2:** Request additional funding to obtain the temporary use of a subcontractor to eliminate the backlog of the 632 open service requests.
- **Priority 3:** Increase funding and staff to provide graffiti abatement that is not currently covered by DAA or the vendor contracted by BSD. An approximate cost would be in the area of \$451,071 supporting two crews, equipment and supplies.
 - Best Practice: Wiping Out Graffiti in Houston Facts
<http://www.houstontx.gov/graffiti/facts.html>:
 "Based on figures from a variety of cities across the country, graffiti cleanup costs taxpayers \$1-3 per person." "Studies show that the removal of graffiti within 24 to 48 hours results in a nearly zero rate of reoccurrence."

- **Priority 4:** Provide additional funding/approval for AIPP to develop murals, and other art projects for areas that vandals repeatedly target to encourage alternative artistic talent. A good example of this is below:
 - Union Pacific, while presently reviewing a number of long-term area safety improvements with the City of Austin, is willing to entertain a proposal for a public art mural to be painted on the Union Pacific Bridge that crosses over Lady Bird Lake between Lamar Boulevard and South Congress Avenue in hopes that it would deter future graffiti vandalism. Over the years, this is a location that has seen recurring graffiti and has generated public complaints. Union Pacific has invested in camera technology-that alerts Union Pacific's Response Management Communications Center and APD when there are trespassers. In 2015, there were 193 incidents but with limited cross-departmental success in catching trespassers and graffiti vandals. The Cultural Arts Division has expressed support in this idea and there seems to be some potential private interest in funding the project. At this point, it is not known if there is public support. There does need to be consideration made to long term maintenance and who would be responsible party.
- Request the Chamber of Commerce to include graffiti removal enforcement to all new and incoming businesses.
- Hire a consultant to review the current Graffiti Abatement Program strategies and make recommendations to enhance the current program as was done in the City of San Jose.
- Explore a special tax assessment to generate funding to abate graffiti, similar to the Downtown Austin PID or institute a sales tax on spray paint.

Enforcement

- **Priority 5:** Review the current Graffiti Ordinance to strengthen enforcement, clearly define public versus private property and include penalties and/or probation for adults and minor vandals.
- **Priority 6:** Enforce business owners to remove graffiti (APD District Representatives and Austin Code Department)
- **Priority 7:** Develop significant penalties, and create a formula to compute damages (APD, courts, and Austin Code Department to work collaboratively).
- **Priority 8:** Conduct investigations through APD to catch graffiti vandals. There are a lot of documented graffiti vandals' internet YouTube videos and areas that are repeatedly vandalized with graffiti.
- Work with local merchants to identify individuals who purchase graffiti supplies.

Education, Outreach and Volunteer Recruitment

- **Priority 9:** Create an anti-graffiti coalition that includes the city, businesses, non-profits, and the community to coordinate efforts, build capacity, and leverage community resources.
 - Best practice of San Jose, Milwaukee, Portland
- **Priority 10:** Conduct community education through speaking engagements, community events, neighborhood outreach, and public service announcements.
 - Best Practice-cities across the nation host large community events/campaigns:
Denver's "Brush Off" campaign is a call to action for citizens to partner with the City to keep their communities free of graffiti vandalism.
City of Dallas hosts Graffiti Wipe-Out with over 200 sites abated on one day.
- Develop PSA (Mayor, APD Chief) about graffiti abatement, the negative effects it has on the city and ways to volunteer, etc.
- Work closely with local school districts to educate students, parents, and teachers on understanding graffiti, the negative effects of graffiti to include penalties if they are caught, and reporting graffiti.
 - Best practice to incorporate into curriculum: Portland, Phoenix
- Engage area college organizations fraternities, sororities, to support efforts through community service and orient incoming freshman about the Graffiti Ordinance and volunteer opportunities.
- Develop a Clean Routes to School Initiative (similar to Safe Routes to Schools).
- Develop a monthly volunteer training.
- Collaborate with neighborhood associations to report and assist with abatement efforts.
- Participate with United Way Day of Giving and Clean Sweeps effort.
- Continue partnership with Keep Austin Beautiful to assist in abatement efforts.
- Prioritize graffiti abatement as project for PARD's It's My Park Day

Below is a list of recommended community organizations the graffiti abatement programs are currently or should consider collaborating with on abatement efforts.

- Neighborhood Housing and Community Development Programs
- DAA
- Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts
- Austin Parks Foundation
- Churches
- University organizations
- Color Squad/Art in Public Places
- Environmental Groups
- Lion's Club and Little Helping Hands
- Non-traditional organizations with gang affiliation

Summary

Graffiti costs thousands of dollars each year and often leads to even more graffiti, vandalism and crime. The presence of graffiti in a community increases citizens' fears about their safety, reduces property values, signals to criminals that residents do not care about their neighborhood, and invites more serious crime. For the health, safety and well-being of our community, it is recommended that the appropriate resources and the prioritized action steps above, be taken to address this growing issue in our community.