

CITY HALL

Vandalism cost city taxpayers \$40,000 last year

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Vandalism in the city's recreational areas, trails and parks is costing taxpayers \$40,000 a year and that's just for one city department, says parks and trees manager Don Murray.

Murray delivered a presentation Monday to the city's community services committee.

Signs at the city's trail visitor centre have been torn off, pickets from the fence destroyed, and gutters and shingles damaged when people try to hang from the gutters of the trail centre roof. Two days ago, the door was broken and the building was spray painted.

"It's terribly frustrating and the people who have to go out and clean this up, this is taking them away from their regular duties and jobs, plus we try to keep a nice clean and green city. When we see our signs all tagged up and our park benches, it's very frustrating," Murray said. "It's getting worse. If you walk through Odell Park this year, you'll see everything is tagged and marked and painted and previous years it wasn't like that."

The Thailand-style sun shelter along the city's walking trail has been repeatedly tagged by graffiti writers.

At Royals Field, the press box was broken into and the city had a \$1,000 repair bill after copper hunters stole wiring. Murray said the value of the copper was only a couple of dollars.

At Fredericton Botanic Garden's small meeting place in Odell Park, the door was tagged with spray-painted slogans and flower boxes were destroyed.

Park signs, walking trail signs, park kiosks are repeatedly spray-painted with vulgar and racist slogans. To remove spray-paint from concrete requires the expertise of a company with special products.

"(Public) washrooms are vandalized four to five times per week. We get a call practically every day about some type of vandalism to our washrooms and we spend a lot of time repainting."

At Odell Park, vandals threw mud on the walls and floors and used mud to write slogans on the walls.

Portable toilets are also targets.

"Last year, we lost five port-a-potties. They're \$800 apiece and they were burned or practically destroyed. We also incurred probably another \$1,500 in damages that we had to pay for," Murray said.

Forty signs in Odell Park were damaged in 2011, costing about \$20 each to replace. Virtually every park bench in the city gets spray-painted by graffiti writers.

People driving across sports fields damage the fields and sometimes play has to be called off.

Close to \$3,200 in damage occurred when a utility vehicle stolen from Carman Creek Golf course in Lower St. Mary's was taken on a joy ride along the north side Gibson area trail with damage to fences and signs.

Vandals put an \$8000 hole in the fence around Queens square pool.

Murray said the \$40,000 spent to fix up damage caused in 2011 is taxpayers money that could have gone to better use.

"It takes a big bite out of our operational budget," he said. "We don't have a budget that says vandalism. It's money that comes out of playgrounds, sports fields, parks and trees budget basically."

Murray wants citizens to get involved in combatting the crimes by using their electronic devices to grab photographs of damaged locations.

"If you see someone walking with a fat marker, they're probably not out drawing in a book. They're probably out marking on something that doesn't belong to them. If people see this happening, take out your camera and phones and take a picture and send it to the police station," Murray said

"A lot of times, it's difficult because of the nature of the offence. A lot of times it's a crime of opportunity. It's done out of the public's eyes and a lot of times it's seen by the perpetrator as being relatively harmless and they don't truly appreciate the true cost of their actions," said Fredericton Police Staff-Sgt. Brian Ford, the officer in charge of the force's neighbourhood action teams.

The city installed blank plywood walls to try to encourage graffiti writers, who see what they do as art rather than vandalism, to use those spaces instead of vandalizing businesses or public spaces. It's had some efficacy when combined with education and police will continue communicating with youth about the issue.

"It's discouraging and overwhelming," said community services committee chairman Coun. Steve Hicks.

It's not fair to simply blame youths since young adults are equally involved in vandalism, Hicks said.

<http://www.telegraphjournal.com/tjonline/thedailygleaner/8819485-266/murray-park-vandalism-signs.html.csp>