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City Hate Response

Can public condemnations make some hate incidents worse?

If a graffiti swastika appears on a sidewalk, do you publicly condemn the outrage to the entire city or just cover it and keep quiet?

If you publicize it, you may be giving the perpetrator exactly the attention that he or she wanted, exposing the hate message to far more people, perpetuating copy-cat crimes and making a big deal out of what could have been a 14-year-old's clueless prank.

But ignore it and you could be complicit in a hate crime by sending a tacit message that discrimination is OK in this town and allowing it to victimize more people.

That's the dilemma that the Eugene City Council, Human Rights Commission (HRC) and city staff struggled with at a Jan. 8 meeting to discuss a proposal for a coordinated response strategy for hate incidents.

"I don't think there is a right answer," said city HRC staffer Greg Rikhoff of the publicity quandary.

desire to keep quiet should be balanced against the needs of the community to stop the crime from recurring.

Rikhoff agreed but wondered just how to strike the balance. "When does community need outweigh that special interest?"

Another issue is coordinating with race and interest groups, taking care not to bowl them over, Rikhoff warned. "There's nothing like something happened with the Latino community and the European-American community stepping up and taking over and telling the Latino community what they should say and think about it."

Coordinating is good, Piercy said, but the city's response should be timely. "You shouldn't have to wait until somebody says, 'What the heck are you doing about this?'" the mayor said. "We know how we feel about hate, and we should be able to respond fairly quickly."

Councilor Andrea Ortiz said the city staff

'We know how we feel about hate, and we should be able to respond fairly quickly.'

— MAYOR KITTY PIERCY

But he said the city shouldn't be "in denial" about the existence of hate crimes in the community. Rikhoff said last Thanksgiving weekend, a large number of hate graffiti and swastikas were painted at South Eugene High school and along the Amazon bike path and park. Earlier last year, the River Road neighborhood was hit three times in one week by racist graffiti on cars, boats and garage doors.

The "scary" message is "we don't like you, we don't want you, we want you gone, we will hurt you," Rikhoff said. "This is a very real problem."

But there's been no coordinated response among the 11 different local government jurisdictions. The River Road graffiti crossed jurisdictions and was described as "vandalism" in a Lane County press release and not cleaned up, whereas in a city of Eugene press release it was described as a "hate crime" and removed, according to Rikhoff.

In another incident last spring, two schools were hit with hate graffiti, Rikhoff said. One school called an assembly, sent a letter home, had a PTA meeting and offered a reward; the other school just quietly covered up the graffiti the same day.

Some individual victims, even with \$20,000 in damage, fear that they will be attacked again and ask that nothing be done, saying, "We'd rather have this go by quietly," Rikhoff said. Others want to publicize the incident so more people aren't victimized the same way. The response can vary widely among different communities such as gays and lesbians and Latinos, he said.

Mayor Kitty Piercy said an individual's

should do a better job of telling elected officials about hate crimes early so they can respond.

Councilor Chris Pryor said the community should undertake a major education effort such as the largely successful effort to make drunk driving socially unacceptable. "Even little things aren't necessarily little, they're big things," he said of hate messages.

Other discussed issues included:

- the difficulty of catching perpetrators;
- the need not to interfere with police investigations;
- constitutional protections of hate leafletting as free speech;
- counter-leafletting by citizen groups;
- the city producing a newspaper insert on race issues;
- the city sponsoring a major conference on hate crimes;
- the need to verify incidents before denouncing them to avoid embarrassment;
- the difficulty of assessing the magnitude of incidents without appearing insensitive;
- cyber hate bullying among local kids on Myspace.com;
- passing more council resolutions condemning hate messages; and,
- posting signs labeling the city a "Hate Free Zone."

One human rights commissioner described a non-English speaking neighbor who was victimized by hate graffiti on her car. "She says she's scared now to have her kids walk to school" at South Eugene High School. But "she's so thrilled the Council is concerned about this."

EW