

## The Broken Window Theory

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I have enjoyed living in this community for 3 years now. In that time, it appears to me that there has been an unfortunate increase in graffiti, broken glass, vandalized bus stops and vehicles, and increasing amounts of litter. Dog excrement seems more evident encased in plastic bags left on the paths or hung in trees! (Refer to my Dog Poo article in the Gazette's February 2004 issue). Not only appalling to the eye, the poo and broken glass present health threats, and the entire trend is a negative one.

My observations reminded me of the Broken Window Theory I read a few years ago, authored by Henry G. Cisneros (the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the States) titled "Defensible Space: Detering Crime and Building Community" - January 1995) which I wanted to share with you:

*James Q. Wilson and George Kelling developed the 'broken windows' thesis to explain the signaling function of neighborhood characteristics. This thesis suggests that the following sequence of events can be expected in deteriorating neighborhoods. Evidence of decay (accumulated trash, broken windows, deteriorated building exteriors) remains in the neighborhood for a reasonably long period of time. People who live and work in the area feel more vulnerable and begin to withdraw. They become less willing to intervene to maintain public order (for example, to attempt to break up groups of rowdy teens loitering on street corners) or to address physical signs of deterioration.*

*Sensing this, teens and other possible offenders become bolder and intensify their harassment and vandalism. Residents become yet more fearful and withdraw further from community involvement and upkeep. This atmosphere then attracts offenders from outside the area, who sense that it has become a vulnerable and less risky site for crime.*

The literature goes on to suggest the following strategies to deter and reduce crime:

- Quick replacement of broken windows
- Fast clean up of illegally dumped items, litter and spilled garbage
- Quick paint out of graffiti
- Finding (or building) better places for teens to gather than street corners
- Fresh paint on buildings
- Clean sidewalks and street gutters

Clearly Mr. Cisneros is writing about communities in crisis. I am not suggesting for a moment that Strathcona resembles them, but I believe the theory is good one for food for thought. I hope that the theory can perhaps encourage everyone (and not just in Strathcona either) to realize their connection to a healthy community and what happens when communities are not maintained effectively.

What can you do to help on a regular basis?

- Get involved with community pride, cleanliness and connection.
- Pick up trash when you're out walking with or without a pooch.
- Keep vigilant and report any suspicious activity or vandalism.
- Help your neighbours.
- Know where your kids are and what they're doing.
- Maintain your property with a spirit of high pride of ownership.

Strathcona is wonderful place to live – let's all take part in keeping it that way!

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