

## **Town and Gown Association of Ontario Symposium**

Christopher Collmorgen and Sam Almsaddi of Action Sandy Hill attended the annual Town and Gown Association of Ontario (TGAO) Symposium at Kingston, Ontario, from May 13-15, 2012. Three Ottawa Police Services officers, one Bylaw Services representative and three University of Ottawa delegates also attended the sold-out event.

The Symposium was also the TGAO Annual General Meeting and elections that saw Sam Almsaddi join the Board of Directors of the TGAO, bringing much needed Eastern Ontario representation to the Association.

The Symposium was attended by 140 delegates and the agenda revealed that Town and Gown is more than just about “controlling rowdy students” - it is about improving the quality of life for everyone by creating safe, sustainable and healthy communities. An abridged version of the agenda can be found at <http://www.tgao.ca/2012-symposium> and the following represents an overview of some of the sessions.

The Council of Ontario Universities, made an excellent presentation on how the 21 universities in 35 communities across the province are key partners in making these communities economically vibrant, that they can enhance communities and revitalize downtown cores, and can be partners to help solve local issues and enrich the social and cultural fabric.

In the discussion about student-led initiatives, Queen’s discussed its struggle with the appearance of the student neighborhood to the north of the campus. Among the main identified problems are 1) students not taking ownership or care for the places they live, 2) absentee landlords and 3) effectiveness of bylaw services to deal with small issues quickly before they become more serious. Queen’s introduced the “Student Maintenance and Resource Teams (SMART)” – pairs of students that roam the neighborhood with a cart that has a garbage can, blue, black and grey bins, brooms, rakes and dustpans – that pick up garbage on the streets, sidewalks, private and public property. They are paid by the university student government that recovers costs by charging landlords monthly fees to look after the yards and offer a mail collection service for students that are away for summer or winter breaks. The initiative has been well received and provides the university with some much needed positive PR. In fact, the city recently selected SMART to be a property standards bylaw contractor. This project was conceptualized by students as part of an entrepreneurial program that had community engagement and revenue generation as criteria.

London, Ontario, reported that its new Nuisance Bylaw was passed at Committee and was going to full council in late May for final review and possible ratification. As successfully implemented in in East Lansing, Michigan, and Fort Collins, Colorado, London believes the bylaw will make a difference to dissuade large out-of-control parties, litter, public urination and littering.

A review of the St. Patrick’s Day events at Fanshawe revealed that 29 students have now been suspended for their involvement, as per the student code of conduct. The College President and the student government continue to push for solutions to prevent further such incidents have publicly vowed to leave no option unexplored.

The raising of the “Heads and Beds” levy came up for discussion. Established as a means to offset some of the costs municipalities incur when providing municipal services to provincial institutions and based on the number of “heads” sleeping in institutional “beds,” the rate of \$75 per head has been unchanged since 1987. The payment compensates municipalities for providing local resources to support provincial services but the undervalued rate means that municipalities are subsidizing provincial costs by diverting funds from other important priorities, municipal services and projects. More than 50 municipalities are pushing for a rate increase to \$146 but Ottawa – with 100,000 post-secondary students – is not one of them.

The current status of licensing of rental properties in Waterloo, Oshawa, London and Hamilton was also discussed. Waterloo and Oshawa both have well-established programs in place. London reported that the most recent appeal by landlords to overturn licensing has been withdrawn, meaning the City is back on track to have all of its properties licensed as quickly as possible. Hamilton has started a proactive campaign on property standards and yard maintenance and is considering taking on rental property licensing.

Between sessions and in the evenings, ASH networked with other community associations, including the Sydenham District Association, the ASH equivalent around Queen’s. It is struggling with many of the same issues as Sandy Hill, especially now that students are moving into residential areas and family homes are being converted into student rentals. ASH also met with the head of Save Our Neighborhood Action Group, an organization of “fed up” residents that employ very public and radical tactics effect change to shame Queen’s into taking more responsibility its students off-campus behavior by dissuading alumni from donating money, approaching parents at campus tours and convocation and posting the identities of persons found guilty of liquor law violations during the unofficial Homecoming weekends and the Orientation periods. SONAG’s approach is the result of a group that feels that dialogue has failed.

But perhaps the most important discussions of the Symposium were those that the Ottawa delegates had among themselves around the issues we are facing in Sandy Hill. If anyone from Ottawa came into the Symposium with any apprehension or skepticism, they left more informed about the possibilities and benefits of a strong and collaborative relationship. In fact, I think everyone left feeling more optimistic and hopeful about what we can achieve together.

On a closing but related note, the University of Ottawa is presently searching for a new Vice President of Resources who would have the responsibility of community relations in their portfolio. ASH was asked by the University – and agreed – to speak with the recruitment company to provide them with an idea of what community expectations are for an improved relationship. The new VP, the three U of O representatives at the Symposium and the pending launch of the Town and Gown Committee indicates the start of a stronger commitment by the University to collaborate with us on addressing the problems of being a near-campus neighbourhood. Change is coming and we need to be ready for what it brings – some will think it is going too fast and others will think it is not going fast enough. Nonetheless, we are on the right path.

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Photo caption: A Queen's SMART team cleaning the streets on the student neighborhood. Photo credit: Christopher Collmorgen