



**The STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition
Meets to Formulate Strategies**

April 2005 Newsletter

**Alderman
Diane Colley-Urquhart**

Action Against Illegal Marihuana Grow Ops Needed Now More Than Ever

I wanted to provide you with an update on the important work of the STOP MGO's! Calgary Coalition. We have taken the lead nation-wide, beginning in November of 2004 with the formation of Canada's first action-oriented community initiative. As chair of the coalition with 44 key community stakeholders, our Charter Statement reflects our community's commitment to eradicating this problem in our city:

***For a safer city, we are joining forces
in creating an effective, sustainable, collaborative coalition
to stop marihuana grow operations in Calgary.***

The Calgary Police Service estimates that well over 90% of illegal marihuana grow ops (MGOs) are operated by organized crime groups. The illicit drug trade is inextricably linked to criminal activity and increases the level of crime and violence in our communities. The multi-million dollar profits generated from MGOs fuel diversified criminal activities including the importation of ecstasy, cocaine, methamphetamine precursors, and manufacturing and/or trafficking methamphetamines, firearm purchases and others. The criminal elements attracted to neighborhoods may also be armed and violent, or commit residual crimes. Police often encounter homes fortified with firearms and other booby traps when conducting investigations and searches of MGOs.

What was once believed to be a problem concentrated on the west coast of British Columbia is now expanding across the country at an alarming rate. Illegal MGOs are increasing at unprecedented proportions and the city of Calgary has become a stronghold for this criminal activity, with MGOs infiltrating almost every Calgary neighborhood. The impacts and losses are far-reaching, from the theft of power, to insurance and mortgage fraud, to artificially inflated residential property values, to environmental contamination, and to health and safety hazards that first and second responders and the public are exposed to on a daily basis, as well as increased levels of crime and violence in our communities. This is organized crime manifesting itself in our neighborhoods.

It is clear that this is not just a policing problem. This is a complex, multi-faceted community problem.

Calgary has seen a significant increase in the number of successful seizures of illegal marihuana over the past 2 years as a result of the strategic partnership formed in 2003 between the RCMP & Calgary Police Service Drug Units and the Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta, known as SAMIT (the Southern Alberta Marihuana Investigative Team). In 2001, the value of marihuana plants seized amounted to \$9M; in 2002, \$19M; in 2003, \$53M; and in 2004, \$101M, an increase of 532% in 3 years. The public have been active participants in reporting suspected MGOs and in 2004, provided over 900 tips to CrimeStoppers and the Calgary Police Service. Over 120 tips have already come in during the first 2 months this year. Policing resource levels are such that only about 40% of all the MGO tips received in 2004 were investigated.

Innovative problem-solving approaches must not only focus on seizure, but also on prevention, regulation and supply reduction to eliminate these hazards to our community. Success lies in implementing a new integrated approach. The STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition is one such innovative, integrated multi-stakeholder approach to ridding our community of this problem.

The STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition is comprised of five action-oriented Task Forces aligned with stakeholder interests:

The **Commercial Task Force** is comprised of representatives from the Real Estate Council of Alberta, Calgary Real Estate Board, Canada Revenue Agency, Insurance Bureau of Canada, Canadian Banking Association, CMHC, CPS Drug Unit, Enmax, and a business representative who have identified strategies that deter insurance and mortgage fraud and monitor excessive electric consumption. As well, strategies for action against “dirty” inspection companies, realtors, lawyers and other professionals involved in this criminal activity have been identified.

The **Public Safety Task Force** is made up of representatives from the Fire Department, CPS & RCMP Drug Units, City Building Regulations, Calgary Health Region, City Solid Waste and a business representative. This Task Force has identified aggressive strategies to repair and remediate MGO properties that prohibit cover-up of potential health and safety risks, as well as assessing MGO owners’ fees to cover the cost of inspections and penalties for improper work without permits. Training of all front-line City and utility staff in recognition and reporting of suspected MGOs is on-going.

The **Legislative/Judiciary Task Force** is comprised of representatives from City Bylaw Services, RCMP & CPS Drug Units, Federal Justice, Calgary Apartment Association, Fire Department, City Building Regulations, and a community representative, who are reviewing current bylaws and legislation to determine what amendments are necessary to deter this criminal activity. They are also actively lobbying other levels of government for minimum sentences upon conviction.

The **Communications & Community Task Force** is made up of representatives from City & CPS Communications & Public Affairs, CrimeStoppers, City Bylaw Services, Calgary Apartment Association, RCMP & CPS Drug Units, Calgary Real Estate Board, Enmax, Calgary Health Region, Calgary Blockwatch, Calgary Fire Department, Safer Calgary, Federation of Calgary Communities, and business & community representatives. They are developing a comprehensive communication strategy that aims to educate and inform the public of the dangers and risks of illegal MGOs through community forums, development of a website, development and distribution of publications, as well as action plans to engage citizen action groups and volunteers.

The **Project Management Task Force** is comprised of representatives from Calgary Blockwatch, CPS Drug Unit, and a community representative, whose focus explores sources of funding for the STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition, the setup and staffing of the STOP MGOs! Office, and lobbying of other levels of government to support the initiative.

We will not remain complacent as this criminal activity continues to infiltrate our neighborhoods. The work of the Coalition is reflective of the commitment of all of the stakeholders to address this problem through a sustained and coordinated community effort. We acknowledge that this work will not be completed overnight, and we will continue to do what is necessary to make Calgary a safer city.

As always, you can contact my office regarding this or any other civic matter at 268-1624, by email at dcolley@calgary.ca, or through my website, www.aldermandiane.ca. Alternatively, you can contact 268-CITY (2489).