

A Fire Hydrant By Any Other Colour

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The town of Wawota is going bravely where Regina fears to tread.

While Regina has recently been cracking down on people who try to brighten up the streetscape by decoratively painting fire hydrants, the town fathers in the southeastern Saskatchewan town of Wawota - population 670 - have taken the opposite approach.

The local town council not only allows people to decorate their fire hydrants, they actually give them money out of town coffers to buy the paint.

And the result has been an eclectic collection of colour fully decorated fire hydrants depicting cartoon characters, sports figures, animals and various types of people.

"We've got everything from a hockey player, to Sylvester to Tweety Bird," said Norm Oliver, the Mayor of Wawota

"It looks different, it looks nice," Oliver said.

But Oliver diplomatically side-stepped questions why decorated hydrants are such a good idea in Wawota but apparently not in Regina - a question he prefers to allow officials in Regina to answer for themselves.

The answer from Grant Nicurity, a spokesman for the Regina fire department is that the painting of fire hydrants in colours other than the standard red or yellow causes concern for firefighters.

Among those concerns is the need to quickly locate a hydrant in a fire emergency which could be difficult for firefighters if - for example - a hydrant, partially covered with snow, was painted white.

Another concern is that people who improperly paint a hydrant could damage the threads and lead to a malfunction, Nicurity said.

There is also a growing trend to color-code fire hydrants according to their size and pumping capacity so that firefighters arriving at a fire scene can immediately tell which kind of hydrant is there, Nicurity said.

So there has been a move in Regina to discourage people from decorating their hydrants.

Among the people who disagree with that policy is Carol Einfeld, a resident of south east Regina, who painted a hydrant near her home in a black and white Dalmatian dog motif and was not amused when city officials repainted it yellow.



And Gerald Woloshyn, another resident of southeast Regina, has also been involved in a tug-of-war with the city, after he painted the hydrant in front of his house green.

Woloshyn said he doubts if a green fire hydrant would be difficult for firefighters to find and he also disputes the other arguments that firefighters would be hampered in doing their jobs if hydrants are painted something other than red or yellow.

Woloshyn, who is a businessman, said he gets frustrated with people at city hall who get involved in things that are "a waste of their time and my (taxpayer's) money."

Getting involved in disputes with people about the colour of fire hydrants is one such example of a waste of time and money, Woloshyn said.

In Melville northeast of Regina - about 60 per cent of the city's fire hydrants have been decorated in a manner somewhat similar to Wawota.

And Melville fire chef Roger Nordick said he had no problems with the decorated fire hydrants, which he finds quite interesting and enjoyable.

But Nordick cautions that decorated fire hydrants can be a problem "unless it's done in an organized fashion.

Proper controls are needed, so the decorations are in good taste and so the hydrants are not damaged during the painting, Nordick said.

Precautions must also be taken so that firefighters can find the hydrants in a hurry. It is also important for firefighters to be able to quickly tell what kind of fire hydrant they are at and what size of water main it is serviced by, Nordick said.

But strict colour-coding of hydrants is not the only way to tell firefighters about the nature of the fire hydrant, Nordick said.

A small label on both sides of a hydrant could provide firefighters with the information they need, while still allowing for some colourful and imaginative decorations on the hydrants, Nordick said.

Meanwhile back in Wawota, people say they're just having fun.

We've had a very positive response here, the children really loved it, said Shirley Corkish, a secretary for the local health district, who was one of a team of volunteers that went around Wawota painting the hydrants.

Corkish, who came originally from Regina, said she can understand why it might be easier to informally manage a hydrant decoration program in a small town with a relatively small number of hydrants than in a larger community like Regina.

But in Wawota, she said, it is working fine.

