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Langley RCMP Const. Diane Blaine holds an example of typical copper wiring with the new copperweld wiring, which is worth much less than pure copper. BC Hydro, the RCMP and local municipalities are getting together to try to tackle the growing problem of metal theft.

Photo/Brent Beadle

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Metal theft: A united fight

Eve Edmonds

Now Contributor

Imitation is the best form of flattery, and Richmond is blushing.

The city has devised a model that other communities aim to emulate in the fight against metal thefts, said Cliff Gitten, co-ordinator of a working group comprising representatives from the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley.

The group was formed to deal with rampant metal thefts that have cost the region millions of dollars over the past couple of years.

Last month, the Now reported metal thieves have drained City of Surrey taxpayers of an estimated \$200,000 in 2006 by stealing wiring out of street lights. In December alone, approximately 10 kilometres of the wire was stolen, according to Vincent Lalonde, Surrey's utilities manager.

Gitten was at a press conference this month to announce the cross-jurisdictional approach to metal theft.

"We are attempting to draft a bylaw that each of the members can take back to their respective councils," he said. "We expect it to model, substantially, the Richmond bylaw."

Last month, Richmond enacted a scrap metal bylaw requiring scrap metal dealers to maintain a registry of the metal products they purchase - similar to what is required of pawnbrokers. The registry must be submitted to the RCMP on a regular basis.

The bylaw also demands dealers hold onto their scrap metal purchases for seven days if the transaction is submitted to RCMP electronically, and 21 days if it is recorded by written registry.

"Our estimate is that in 2006 alone, the city (of Richmond) suffered \$400,000 in damages and losses attributed to metal theft, and that doesn't even take into account the losses incurred by the various citizens of our community," said Mayor Malcolm Brodie during a press conference to unveil the cross-jurisdictional approach to metal theft. "Clearly action needed to be taken."

It was also clear to councillors that scrap metal dealers were part of the problem.

In a video shown to reporters, undercover cops posing as metal thieves sold clearly marked metal products, such as Vancouver fire department ladders, Telus phone cable and the top half of a telephone booth, to scrap metal recyclers.

While the Richmond bylaw attempts to hold scrap metal recyclers accountable for their purchases, it is careful not to hinder the scrap metal industry at large; hence, various exemptions are stipulated.

Licensed companies that are invoiced for payment at a later date will



be exempt from these regulations, for example. Also, staff is currently making amendments to exempt consignment stores from the bylaw.

But while the bylaw clearly targets an important link in the chain of illegal activity, it will only be effective if other jurisdictions get on board, Brodie said.

"This is not a problem that is unique to the city of Richmond and we can't solve it alone. It only does us a limited amount of good if thefts in our city continue and the people stealing the metal products simply drive to another nearby jurisdiction and are able to readily market the materials. It takes a co-ordinated approach."

Richmond RCMP Supt. Ward Clapham agreed that a well-crafted, consistent bylaw is essential to combat the problem. Until now, responses have varied widely from municipality to municipality, he explained.

"That's led thieves to trek out with stolen property across the region to find buyers. It has even spawned a new middleman level of metal theft. These middlemen buy the stolen goods direct from individuals who bring it to them on foot or by bike, and they take the pickup load of scrap metal to the scrap metal yards that only accept the metal in pickup trucks or in bulk."

A co-ordinated bylaw is the best approach, Clapham added, "because criminal charges can be difficult to lay."

But a new bylaw is not the only way to tackle what in some cases has been a deadly crime, said BC Hydro spokeswoman Elisha Moreno.

BC Hydro is replacing pure copper wire with copper weld, a copper-coated metal composite that fetches a tenth of the price of pure copper, she said.

Also, the power company is now spraying all its wire with what looks like tiny dots that, under magnification, are numbers that identify the product as belonging to BC Hydro. Scrap metal dealers won't be able to argue they didn't know where the metal came from.

Finally, all municipalities and BC Hydro are looking at ways to better secure their metals.

"This impacts so many jurisdictions we found that there are multiple needs out there. It has to be approached from many different avenues," said Moreno.