

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Rainbow Crosswalks, Pride Flags, & “Neutrality” Bylaws

What are “neutrality” bylaws?

So-called “neutrality” bylaws most commonly target 2SLGBTQ+¹ communities by attempting to restrict the public display of pride flags or rainbow crosswalks on municipal property, often premised on the belief that they are a distraction or political in nature. These bans largely began in the United States but have now started to spill into Canada. “Neutrality” bylaws may be interpreted differently by different people, and many will see them as targeting specific groups in the community.

Do rainbow or decorative crosswalks pose traffic safety issues?

No, in fact, research suggests the opposite². Studies conducted on decorative crosswalks by the City of Edmonton and the California Capital Area Development Authority found no increase in traffic safety issues for vehicles or most pedestrians³. The City of Edmonton’s pilot project noted a reduction in dangerous behaviour from motorists when contrasted with regular control intersections.

Decorative crosswalks often heighten visibility and bring vibrancy to neighbourhoods, as well as a sense of joy to users. They also make visible statements about the importance of inclusion and diversity. A crosswalk is a reminder to look out for vulnerable people, respect their right of way, and let them pass unharmed. A rainbow crosswalk does all this while showing members of a particularly vulnerable population that their community supports them.

Should municipalities fly only Canadian, provincial, or municipal flags?

For decades, municipalities across Canada (and around the world) have flown various flags and displayed symbols to indicate support for special days, historic events, festivals, and other community celebrations. “Neutrality” bans fail to recognize Canada’s multicultural and pluralistic society and restrict important civic expressions supporting residents in your community.

Using the same logic of “neutrality,” a precedent could be established that impacts organizations like churches and other religious institutions, which may no longer be afforded preferential treatment and could be required to pay municipal property taxes based on “neutrality” in matters of religious, political, or other grounds. Public holiday celebrations, such as putting up Christmas or Easter decorations, events recognizing veterans, and others, may also no longer be permitted at municipal facilities if “neutrality” were to be truly enforced.

Should taxpayers pay for rainbow or decorative crosswalks?

Many rainbow or decorative crosswalks are paid for by private donations and painted and maintained by community volunteers. While rainbow or decorative crosswalks may cost a little more to install and maintain than traditional white or “zebra” crosswalks, they also serve important civic functions like neighbourhood beautification, enhanced visibility, community vibrancy, and demonstrated support for inclusion.

When rainbow crosswalks are present with other decorative crosswalks and symbols, particularly those with Indigenous or ethnocultural themes, it signals an atmosphere that celebrates a community’s diversity.

What is the cost of such bylaws?

“Neutrality” bylaws can have major social, emotional, and monetary costs. They can affect a community’s ability to recruit and retain diverse employees, and they can dissuade tourism. They can also lead businesses to question whether they want to operate in a community that does not provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere.

“Neutrality” bylaws can cost tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to defend in court, representing a significant taxpayer expense and a major drain on a municipality’s limited resources.

Finally, these bylaws unnecessarily polarize and divide communities and make diverse community members question their safety and inclusion in the place they call home. Moreover, rainbow or decorative crosswalks can be an important part of civic participation and celebration of diverse communities. Regardless, 2SLGBTQ+ community members deserve recognition and support alongside all other communities.

REFERENCES

¹ 2SLGBTQ+ is a common initialism that stands for Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and +, which represents other identities that are part of the sexual and gender diversity spectrum.

² Capitol Area Development Authority. (2020, May). Case Studies: Creative Crosswalks. *Capitol Area Development Authority*. https://www.cadanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CADA-Creative-Crosswalks-Case-Studies_May-2020.pdf

³ CITYlab. (2015). *Executive Summary: Rainbow Crosswalks Pilot – Lessons Learned*. City of Edmonton. https://www.edmonton.ca/public-files/assets/document?path=CITYlab_Rainbow_Crosswalk_Pilot_Final_Summary_September2015.pdf

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