



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

Your Voice for Choice

Coalition pour le droit à
l'avortement au Canada

Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

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January 29, 2013

Open Letter to: *

Mayor and Council
City of Abbotsford
32315 South Fraser Way
Abbotsford, BC V2T 1W7

Re: Please Rescind Approval of Anti-abortion Sign on South Parallel Road

Dear Mayor and Council,

We are writing to express our concerns about a large anti-abortion sign being put up by the Abbotsford Right-to-Life Society, together with a display of thousands of small crosses. Our understanding is that this sign has been erected on a private farm in Abbotsford each year since 1999, with the full approval of the City of Abbotsford. This year's sign reads: "*Abortion stops a beating heart.*" The farm is located at 35164 South Parallel Road, adjacent to the freeway, and is owned by Bill Vanderkooi, who gives his consent to erect the sign and display each year.

The display has caused division in the Abbotsford community from the very beginning, as evidenced by this April 2000 news article: "Crosses send message to freeway travellers" (<http://canadianchristianity.com/crosses-send-message-freeway-travellers-1420/>). It is inappropriate for the City to use its resources and authority to approve what is basically a sectarian religious message that is divisive and upsetting for the community. The sign reflects a common anti-abortion slogan used by the Christian Right against abortion. In addition, the sign is juxtaposed with a display of Christian crosses, making clear the religious meaning of the entire display, which encompasses both the sign and the crosses.

Even if the majority of Abbotsford City Councillors are conservative Christians who are against abortion, this does **not** give Councillors the right to impose their personal religious views on the population at large. As elected officials, you have a special responsibility to remain secular and unbiased, ensuring that no specific religion or religious view is favoured by government action or policy. This is because you serve a diverse community with people of many religions or no religion.

The sign and display are offensive to many people, particularly for many women in your community who have had or may be considering an abortion. This issue was brought to our attention by an Abbotsford

resident who has become so upset and traumatized by the display year after year that she changes her route to avoid it and is considering moving out of the city. It is wrong for the city to approve signage that makes women in your community feel disrespected, intimidated, and excluded. It would be very surprising if the City has not received numerous complaints about the display over the years – yet inexplicably, the Council continues to approve the display's sign each January.

Each of the erected crosses in the field is meant to represent a woman's abortion. But many women having abortions are not Christian and would find it doubly offensive to have their abortion represented by a cross. Together, the sign and crosses are a misappropriation of a woman's private experience that is absolutely no-one's business. The display makes invisible a woman's own feelings, wishes, and experience. It also denies and erases women's constitutional right to bodily security and implies they are murderers if they have abortions – or "victims" of abortion themselves, as if they are not capable of making their own informed decisions.

We believe therefore, that the City's approval of the sign is an act of discrimination against women. We note that neither your sign bylaw nor council discussions on this matter have anything to say about the content of signs. However, the Council is obligated to obey provincial and federal human rights codes that prohibit discrimination, including on the grounds of gender. Further, as a government body, the City also has a duty to uphold the rule of law by respecting women's legal right to abortion and their constitutional rights and equality. The City should foster a community culture that respects women's rights and freedoms by not approving initiatives that directly oppose these values and existing law.

Since the message of the display is religious, divisive, offensive, intrusive, insulting, and discriminatory, and promotes a view in opposition to women's rights and Canadian law, we are asking the City of Abbotsford to:

- Rescind its permission to erect the sign this year.
- Require the sponsors to immediately remove the sign currently on display.
- Never approve this sign or similar signs in future years.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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* <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/action/letter-city-abbotsford.pdf>