

7-18-08 Variety Is The Spice
Current Events
This, That and The Other

If variety is the spice of life, then a board of health is the right place to work and receive well-seasoned sustenance. There's always variety, new topics to research, new people to meet and old topics to revisit. And I guess my desktop reflects the current events. I fool myself when I think that as soon as I resolve this and that issue, my desktop will be tidy. They are only replaced by new topics, new issues, new addresses of concern. Mind you, I am not complaining; just describing.

My desktop clutter is comprised of folders; folders of current issues. I don't let them out of my sight until they are resolved or at least understood, to the best of my ability. Geothermal is an example of a new topic. It is sometimes presented in conjunction with 40B proposals as a way of highlighting its innovation and environmental consciousness. Yet, each time I read about it, I only see the opposite. I see the return of old problems newly disguised. Geothermal heating and cooling systems aim to utilize the constant temperature of the earth by running the heating and cooling system underground before entering the home. Why heat ten-degree temperatures up to seventy when you can begin with fifty? Why cool ninety-degree temps down to sixty-five when you can begin with fifty? It sounds great in terms of saving money, which in turn, would also save on the use of energy, which would be great for the earth, if all goes well. I think we owe it to ourselves and future generations to imagine the worst-case scenarios. Probing into the earth and inserting tubes has the potential for contaminating not only the ground, as we know it, but the subterranean areas as well. We have already taken the surface for granted. What will happen if we assume that these underground layers will not and cannot be impacted by pipes penetrating to new depths? We cannot make the mistake of assuming any longer. If this is allowed, more research is needed and guidance is needed on the safe construction of these systems. How shall the sections of pipe be connected? What forces will play a role on the stability and/or instability of them? I don't know the answers but I am ready to file that folder under Topics by Alphabet, G for Geothermal. Now that I have thought about it, I can file it for future use.

Other desktop folders include Landfill Monitoring. I am almost ready to file that, now that the landfill is capped and we begin thirty years of monitoring.

There are usually one or two housing inspections going on. I keep them handy because they involve a lot of phone calls. I have been fortunate, up until recently, that the numbers have been so low. Lately, though, something has changed and the housing issues are popping up all over the place. There are more and more cases of hoarding, each a little different and each requiring a tailored approach. Then there are the cases of tenants who are desperate for a place and a place they can afford. Sometimes they are reluctant to call the board of health to complain about conditions for fear of retaliation in the form of eviction. Not that there aren't problematic tenants, mind you. Of course there are but the State Sanitary Code is still there to protect all tenants, likable and problematic alike. With the number of baby boomers reaching a peak, the economy at a low, social security questionable, fuel costs soaring and young people who were duped by the sub-prime fiasco, I can only imagine what future housing crises await us.

Of course, there are the septic plans out for review but they are fewer than in past years. There are also the additional ones, though, because of the sad number of foreclosures. I have discovered that, on the whole, banks do not make good owners. They are powerful and swift-acting partners when they hold the mortgage and the home is inhabited by the mortgagee. However, when the mortgagee walks away or leaves after foreclosure, the banks want someone else to complete the Title V inspection, to make it safe by boarding it up or whatever else is needed. So often, we hear the phrase, "As is" or "Buyer responsible for", as though this was only a chipped tea cup at a yard sale.

Then there are the "of the moment" topics. They usually surface with a phone call by a concerned citizen or an outright complaining citizen. Last week saw both. The complaining citizen was really ticked off about the bags of garbage and bags of dog poop left out next door. Sometimes people run out of the town bags required by the pay-as-you-throw program intended to motivate recycling. I can understand running out of money but I also know that we can't leave our garbage outside, attracting flies and animals.

Another concerned citizen described four sightings of a coyote, nearby, close to the house and even growling as the husband was placing the rubbish out by the road. I was very concerned that this animal might be rabid and thought for sure I would hear again from this family. After informing the police and encouraging the family to call me at any time if this continued or escalated, I knew that this was all I could do.

The week progressed in a flurry and ended with a "Whew!" Thus is the variety of topics facing any and every board of health. Addressing them with care and knowledge will keep society as healthy and as safe as possible.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She welcomes your comments. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us