

12-26-08 Look Back, Then Go Forward

In public health, as in business, assessment and planning are an ever-present, ever-active process. The goal is to learn from the past and prepare for the future. It sounds great in textbooks and department head meetings but, in reality, life delivers a lot of surprises and sometimes things just don't go as planned. Let's take a look at how we fared in 2008 and let's make some predictions for 2009.

The column receiving the most positive responses was the one talking about my resignation from the Plympton Board of Health. I called it, "Hey, that's a Pattern!" Lesson learned? When you do the best you can and behave honestly and sincerely, people will understand and offer support. That's a mighty good feeling.

A few people asked me to remind readers that rags have recycling value and, therefore, should not be tossed into a plastic bag destined for a landfill. Donate any kind of cloth to Salvation Army and they will gladly make use of them to support their many worthy causes.

Not a single month, let alone a year, goes by without Boards of Health dealing with sanitation issues. This year saw some major breakthroughs in the area of wastewater treatment. For the first time ever, we are seeing words such as "revive" being applied to a septic system in failure, without ripping it all out and replacing it with another. The method of restoration recently approved by DEP is in the category of bioremediation. Oxygen and friendly bacteria eat up the slime and allow the leaching area to once again leach! Some bugs are dangerous and others are our friends.

Speaking of bad bugs, there was the Lysteria outbreak originating at a small Massachusetts dairy farm, killing four before it was discovered as the source. When we let down our guard and think we are sufficiently protected by one type of ammunition, in this case, pasteurization, an unexpected enemy can creep in the back door. Once again we learn that sanitation is the primary method of protecting life.

Protecting public health and safety requires teamwork and cooperation. Can you believe that many towns have never known the meaning of teamwork because family ties, politics, bad blood and the color of the uniform prevent the necessary cooperation required for success? It's true. Some towns don't mix red and blue. I guess they believe it only makes a bruised purple. Halifax and Plympton are fortunate to have Police, Fire and Medical response personnel who work with each other on almost a daily basis, whether or not they get credit or funding. Thank you, Police Chief Manoogian for caring about emergency preparedness before it became a popular buzzword and a presidential directive. Thank you, Fire Chief Benjamino, for being both a leader and a team player. You and Sgt. Broderick attended the train-the-trainer CERT class, thus making Halifax and Plympton eligible for their first class of this first rate group of civilian helpers. The Community Emergency Response Team has been a welcome participant at events all throughout the year ever since.

Another group of civilians, just doing their duty, as informed and caring citizens, are the people who volunteer their time to sit on various town boards. It can be a thankless job, that's for sure, but democracy needs them. The official board members are

not the only ones volunteering their time and energy to keep their town afloat. There are the individuals who assist in research or who attend meetings so that issues may be fully explored. Sometimes their job is thankless, also. Sometimes they are even publicly criticized for speaking up at these meetings with their “chirpings”. Sing away little birds; democracy needs you, too!

There are so many good people out there. A family from Kosovo was fed and given shelter. No questions asked. A mother fighting breast cancer is offered meals, cleaning, and playtime for her children so that she can concentrate on healing.

I’m so thankful for having had the opportunity to realize the kinder side of nature because nature can seem cruel, also. Next year will still have ticks, mosquitoes, bats, bacteria and diseases. It will bring new concerns, also. Some of them will be manufactured by the human species. When people are in a hurry to achieve their desired goal, they sometimes forge ahead with blinders on. The view is great for a while but it is a narrow image.

In that narrow frame, some huge issues are looming. We’ve had a peek at power plants, casinos and an east coast film studio as neighbors. The ground below us may, in fact, be artificial turf leaching out chemicals into our groundwater and particulate matter into the air our children breathe. Other newly emerging environmental issues include the potential toxicity of algae and deciding what we do with our wastewater. Do we reuse it? Is it safe to use for irrigation? Then, there are the economic dominoes toppling over. How many public health issues will be affected by tough financial times? All of them.

No matter what the issues are, though, taking the time to learn, to listen and to work with others is paramount for effective responses. Those actions and interactions are forms of communication. Effective communication is not a given. It requires constant practice and an open mind, receptive to feedback.

Here’s to 2009! Let’s talk about it! I’m listening.

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