

5-9-14 The Sights of Spring

Some aspects of local public have seasonality to them. In April we have rabies vaccination clinics during rabies awareness month. In May, the Plymouth County Mosquito Control Program sends out its little airplane to conduct larviciding of the swamps before the leaves grow on the trees. While the first crocuses are delightful sights for sore eyes; these other happenings are signs of spring for public health.

It was a long winter, though, with snow as recently as April 16, and I think this was the delay for another sign of spring for your local boards of health: calls of complaint about garbage and rubbish piling up in people's yards. The melting of the snow, the openness of the still bare trees and people getting outdoors for walks and yard work allow for the discoveries every year. Other factors have resulted in more of these complaints than in the past, such as the recession and unemployment rate. Even the increase in drug addiction here on the South Shore has added to the poverty, depression, and challenging family difficulties such as more grandparents raising grandchildren. Some of these families are behind in their bills, facing foreclosure and truly have a difficult time keeping up with rubbish disposal.

When the calls come in, we have to explain that while something unsightly could be an area of blight and it is understandable that people would not want that in their neighborhood, our job is not about appearances; it is to respond to health threats. So, we ask questions. Is there household rubbish with garbage that is attracting animals? Are there containers holding stagnant water where mosquitoes can breed? If so, the agent will respond and take a look.

Sometimes the caller has exaggerated and there isn't much I can do. Other times, it is truly shocking to see how some people live and what has piled up. I knock on the door and I hope, hope, hope. I hope that we can agree to a plan and a timeframe. It usually works out. Do they recycle? If they would only recycle, they would have very little rubbish to dispose of. Do they compost? If they have enough area and compost correctly, it won't attract animals or create odors. It will just grow worms and help to prevent flies from breeding in their rubbish.

Sometimes the people don't answer the door and I have to leave a note with my card. Most call me back and most work out a plan with me.

Then there are the few cases where even though I supplied helpful information, and chances were given; still no action. Certified letters were sent, hearings were held, fines were issued and even 21 D tickets issued, resulting in court action if there is no compliance.

Some of these cases are so extreme that houses have to be condemned as a last resort. As difficult as that is, it can actually open doors of opportunity, such as the time when a young mother of two very young children became eligible for housing. The forced move allowed for a better quality of life for those two children.

Such extreme measures don't happen quickly or without cause or due process. It is important for neighbors and "concerned citizens" to know this and try to understand the reality that, unless it is an imminent threat to public health requiring an immediate, emergency response, things will take time. That's the reality.

Another reality that continues to amaze me and fills me with gratitude and hope: most people are civil and understanding. We talk about their life circumstances. I show sincere empathy and share with them of my own struggles with raising six children and at times even with poverty; but always having to work with a close budget involving yard sales and thrift shops. Most people express their understanding that I am doing my job. Those are good conversations and good moments in my work.

Springtime brings the much longed for sights of flowers and sounds of birds. It also reveals eye sores requiring remediation. Some people need orders of correction. Others could use a hand. Consider helping with yard work and rubbish removal for the elderly, the sick and those facing true hardship. They will thank you and I certainly will too!

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