

9-25-09 This Is A Good Sign

Last summer, when some of Halifax's fresh water beaches closed due to high counts of algae, I did just about anything I could to get the word out on the possible health risks associated with contact and ingestion of the algae. It was a new topic for people and that raised questions and concerns but after attending Selectmen's meetings, I walked out feeling that my efforts were a good beginning. This year, though, dealing with the competing issue of H1N1 influenza compromised advertising the algae sufficiently. I received and passed on the algae updates but I needed help with getting the word out to those who needed it, especially individuals who might not read the paper or look at a website.

Communicating accurate information to the public in a timely manner is challenging under even the best of circumstances. The accuracy factor can change rapidly, depending on the complexity and how variable the circumstances are. Timeliness is difficult to achieve because we don't always know how long it will take for people to receive the message. The more critical the information, the more important it is for the message be distributed in as many ways and venues as possible. If I want everyone to know, my office sends out group emails, makes phone calls, sends faxes, alerts the radio and local cable and maybe even request an interview, to allow an opportunity for questions and answers.

Even if all of that can be achieved, there is still the presentation of the message. If it is a printed notice, does it catch your eye? If it is a radio or TV sound bite, did it catch your ear? Then there are the demographics. Is it geared to you, whoever "you" are? Or did you miss the message because it seemed to be for somebody else?

It is interesting to me that even though we are inundated with information all day long, simple messages on a sign still have their place in a world quickly being taken over by daily blog entries and moment-to-moment text messages and twitters. The need for good old fashioned signage makes sense to me though. People call my office occasionally to request a pooper-scooper sign. (These animal waste abatement signs alert people with simple graphics that Halifax has regulations on this topic and that it is just not cool to leave your dog's deposits behind for others to step in.) They want the sign as a daily reminder. They want the sign because it is physical. If you turn your head away, it is still there when you look back. You can't say that about blips across the bottom of your television screen. Mostly that is annoying but occasionally you caught part of a message and wished you saw the rest of it.

This summer's frustration with the challenges in reporting accurate and timely information about algae week to week for the Monponsett Ponds led me to make inquiries as to who might be interested in building signboards for the ponds. I wanted something like what I have seen at nature trails: solid posts supporting a backing, covered by a little roof to protect the information from the elements, faced with Plexiglas lockable doors. There would be enough room for some history of the ponds, information about the watershed, various factors influencing the health of the ponds, such as keeping fertilizers of it and health factors for those who use the pond, such as avoiding the algae.

I shared my vision with anyone who would listen and you know what? Someone did. A handsome young man, Joseph Garuti, seventeen years old, seeking to earn his classification as an Eagle Scout showed an interest. When we first chatted about it earlier

this summer, he enthusiastically added, “And it could have information about invasive weeds, too! I’ve seen signs about that where we visit in Vermont.”

Last week that young man’s interest was demonstrated by his official written proposal for informational signboards for the Monponsett Ponds in Halifax Massachusetts. It was an honor for me to sign his proposal.

He has more work to do, of course. He needs to raise funds, gather some helpers and meet with the Board of Selectmen to seek permission for placing these signboards on town property. By the time he’s done, he will have learned so much and accomplished so much and I get my wish! Just think; I will be able to unlock those doors and replace the algae updates with the latest information and there it will be for the people who use and love the ponds. Thank you, Joe!

When there are young people who care and care enough to accomplish a good thing; that is a good sign! And it is a good sign for our whole country.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. Do you have ideas for getting the word out? Let her know at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us