

Local Boards of Health 9-28-07

In June of this year, my board hired an administrative assistant. She's great! What a wiz with excel! What a memory! What a quick study! What a good person, too! That last part is just as important as the other attributes and abilities. The local board of health department requires a blend of intelligence and ability, with a concern for the environment and, of course, the health of people. When I was interviewing people for the position, it was difficult to determine if the candidates really understood what the heck they were getting themselves into. How many of us knew about boards of health before we had some reason to get involved with them? As a last step in choosing the assistant, I asked them to look at some websites and tell me what they thought. I wanted to know what their impressions were of MAHB (Massachusetts Association of Health Boards), MHOA (Massachusetts Health Officers Association), Ma DPH (Massachusetts Department of Public Health) and Ma DEP (Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection).

When Peggy, my choice for my administrative assistant, responded, she not only demonstrated that she had thoroughly visited and utilized these sites, she also gave me some examples of what she had learned from these introductory visits to the world of boards of health. One comment of hers is especially memorable and meaningful to me. She was astounded to learn the phrase and concept of "minimum standards". She had thought that boards of health provided "maximum protection". She learned that our state standards provide only the minimum standard of health and safety. Our state allows the local people to exercise "home rule" and leaves them with the responsibility to decide what is needed for further protection. At the local level, we decide what other standards may be needed, other than the minimum.

Our beaches, our housing, our ground water, the air we breathe, the food we eat at a restaurant; the tattoo, massage or pedicure we receive: all have only minimum standards unless the local board of health decides to research the issues and provide more.

This is why every town needs a board of health. We need more protection than what the minimum standards provide.

When you go out to eat, when you have your septic system repaired, when you receive massage therapy, when you are tattooed, when you breathe, when you drink your well water, think of the local board of health. If things are good, thank them. If there is a problem, let them know. They are not super heroes; they do not have ex-ray vision. They need your input.

If you see need for improvement with your local environment, if you think it might need some additional protection beyond the "minimum standard", consider joining your local board of health, and/or other municipal boards. They need caring people. If you have read this far, they need you.

As of September 24, 2007, I am now an appointed member of the Plympton Board of Health. We look forward to your attendance and if you are not able, for some reason, to run for the official position of board of health, you are welcome to visit the open meetings, or email them, or call them and tell them your thoughts. We need your feedback and input.

Why just today, I woke up to two messages on my answering machine. One man thought I might be interested in his observations of some indoor examples of standing

water as possible breeding areas for mosquitoes. He went on to describe his concerns about water left in dehumidifiers and plumbing leaks. He is absolutely right in thinking that mosquitoes, if allowed entry to the indoors and cellar, could and would breed in these locals. West Nile virus, in particular, could result from these breeding areas.

The second call was from Winnie, my 101 (or is it 102?) year-old friend. She has something interesting to tell me about bees. I wasn't able to get in touch with her today but I can't wait to talk to her. I need her and Mr. "D" who watches for mosquito breeding areas and anyone else who is observant and thoughtful and caring. Every board of health needs these people. They need you.