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TROY
 January 18, 2012

City beats blight over recent snowless weeks

By Terry Oparka
 C & G Staff Writer

The weather shift for the past month or so has prompted a shift in how some city staffers spend their time.

Paul Evans, Troy zoning and compliance specialist, said the Code Enforcement Department is as busy as ever, but not with complaints usually received this time of year, such as snow not being removed from public sidewalks.

Inspectors are receiving more reports of other violations — such as blighted buildings, and accumulations of junk and trash — than is usual for this time of year, Evans said.

“Snow is not covering things up,” Evans said, so the condition of property around town is more apparent. The city’s Code Enforcement Department is typically busiest responding to complaints from late April until the end of July, Evans said. However, the spate of fair weather has resulted in reports of violations being made recently, rather than in April, when the snow melts, he said. The department handled 4,239 enforcements in 2011.

Evans said the department, with help from citizen volunteers, continues to keep a sharp eye on signs placed illegally in the city rights of way. Ten volunteers, all Troy residents, working in pairs, tour city streets for about three hours each weekend and remove the illegal signs. Since the program started in September, volunteers have removed 176 signs.

Volunteers undergo background checks, carry ID and use city vehicles to patrol streets.

“All the volunteers are very motivated,” Evans said. “They share a common passion: They want the city to look nice. It’s a very good group.”

Technology has also changed the way inspectors do code enforcement, allowing inspectors equipped with laptops and 4G Internet connection cards to access anything on the city’s database instantly and reply to residents or business owners in the field, said Gary Bowers, housing and zoning inspector.

The aim is to take care of things without a violation notice, in a friendly way, with a quick response, Bowers said. “Technology has been a great tool,” he said. “We’re still busy, but not with snow issues.”

When the snow does fly, residents and business owners have 24 hours to clear public sidewalks of ice and snow. Those cited for failure to do that have 10 days from notification to clear the snow before a contractor is brought in, and the property owner is billed for it, Bowers said.

Tim Richnak, director of public works, said the shift in the weather pattern for the last couple of months has allowed the street division to work on other projects, such as storm sewers, drains, catch basins and ditches.

Richnak wouldn’t say the city will spend less money this year on snow removal than in previous years — just yet — owing to storms yet to come, although no overtime has been needed to date.

“We don’t really look at that until the end of winter,” he said.

“We’ll take a closer look in spring, but we’ve seen a significant reduction up to this point, and there may be less damage to roadways,” he noted. He added that in past years, road crews have worked to clear roads after heavy storms in April.

“The impact is we’ve been able to work on other responsibilities and do some of the work not done if we’re fighting snow and do other maintenance activities on the infrastructure,” he said. “We’ve had almost two free months. Typically, we’ve had snow starting in the last two weeks of November.”

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