

Harrison Happenings

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It is always interesting to hear your words quoted back at you. It reminds me of that party game when people gather in a circle, one whispers a message into the neighbor's ear, which is then whispered to the next person until it goes around the whole circle. Invariably, the message that is stated at the end bears little resemblance to the original message. People filter what they hear through their own thoughts and experiences on the subject.

For example, in May, in one of my conferences about illegal apartments with the building inspector and the code enforcement officer, I said that I did not want any families with school age children living in illegal apartments to be evicted until school closed in June. "Let them finish out the school year," I said. Today I was told that what I had said was that "no families with children should ever be evicted." You see how words get miss-interpreted? Be assured that illegal apartments are still being reported, and summonses given. The last "sweep" was August 4.

Illegal apartments are a substantial source of income for the owners, but are a strain on the Harrison infrastructure and school system. It is no longer parents on the main floor, a daughter upstairs and maybe a younger son in the basement apartment. Now, very often, no family member lives in the house; it is no longer the family home, only a source of income. Add to that the fact that very often every person over 18 has his or her own car, and we have neighbor fighting neighbor for parking spaces. Some people try to solve the parking problem by paving their front yard. That is not only illegal, but it downgrades our neighborhoods.

Let me give you a few statistics on illegal apartments. According to our records, 168 summonses have been issued, with 142 resolved. (More homes than 168 were inspected, but not all had illegal apartments.) The total fines levied so far are \$105,910, with \$5,560 still to be paid. At the moment, there are 12 cases in court. Five summonses were withdrawn, and we lost one in court. Four warrants for arrest have been issued, for people who did not appear in court on the specified date.

To deter illegal apartments we need higher fines. Last year, fines averaged about \$500. This year, the average fine is \$750. The town attorney is drafting an amendment to the Town Code which will raise the fines still further.

Due to the growing financial difficulties that all towns are facing, including Harrison, I have asked all department heads to cut their budgets by 10 percent. Despite this budget crunch, I feel, as do many Harrison residents, that this is an important issue. We have been looking for another building inspector/code enforcement officer who will work flex-time: nights and weekends, so that reported illegal apartments can be visited at times when people are home – not just between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and perhaps one night a month.

The last administration started the crackdown, and it has been continued this year. One problem, of course, is what it costs in overtime when the Town does a "sweep" of neighborhoods in early evening. The fines that are levied, when the owner finally gets into court, do not always cover that cost. So it is a balancing act – cleaning up neighborhoods versus finding the money to cover these expenses. However, I am sure that we will soon find a competent building inspector/code enforcement officer who will help resolve this problem and make all houses compliant with existing codes and regulations.