

Neighborhood Grapevine

News from the City of Milwaukee's
Department of Neighborhood Services



Demolition is started on the former Holiday Inn located at 2601 W. Wisconsin Ave.

Demolition begins on former Holiday Inn

After years of delays and contention, the demolition work on the corner of 27th and Wisconsin got under way this month. The 10-story former Holiday Inn located at 2601 W. Wisconsin Ave. was last home to a university school. The building was connected to the VFW Post which had negotiated a buyout by the redevelopment authority.

The VFW post brought an 11th hour court action to stop the process of the demolition. The building had already been prepared for demolition. Asbestos removal, salvaging work, and utility disconnects had gutted much of the main building.

DNS was called in to Circuit Court to testify about the condition of the property. Nearly all of the hotel's plumbing fixtures were unsealed from the salvage operations. As a result, the sewer gas was pooling in the basement which held the VFW Post and was still occupied. Exit doors had been welded shut, fire suppression systems deactivated, and many fire doors were breached. It was also beginning to attract a lot of squatters which culminated in a very hazardous condition.

The Circuit Court ruled in the City's favor to allow the demolition to occur. The VFW suit against the Redevelopment Authority remains in court.

Other DNS condemnation actions happen a

Quick Response see page 3



Before and after photos of the "Shaming House" The new owner has completed the exterior repairs much to the relief of the neighbors who spent years trying to get the previous owner to fix the property.

Progress Made on "Shaming House"

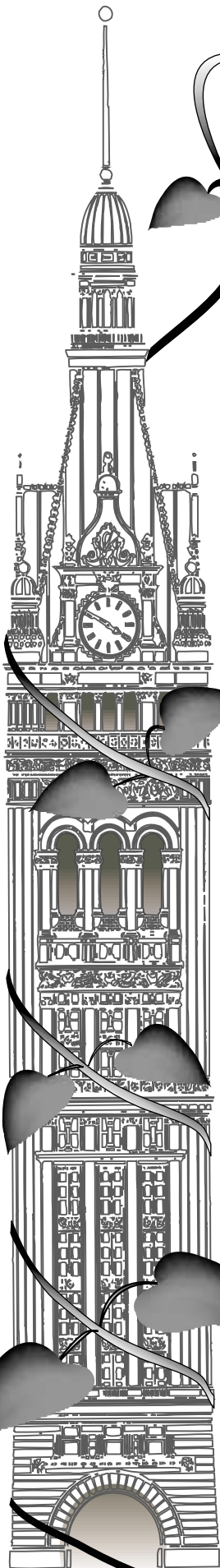
The neighborhood near 2500 N. First St. is looking a bit brighter these days. A home on that block was the featured focus of the first use of Milwaukee's "Shaming Ordinance". The home, then owned by Warren Hornik of Pewaukee, was sold shortly after the City took the action against him after years of delays and fines. The new landlord, Tim Olsen, entered into a restoration agreement with the City in order to bring the sign down.

The Community Housing Coalition selected the home for the shaming after reviewing other candidates. After the media attended the news conference about the sign being posted, they visited Hornik at his home in Pewaukee. The



The Hornik home in Pewaukee provided an interesting contrast to the property owned in Milwaukee.

Shaming House see page 2



Pictures from the field:



QUESTION: What's wrong with this picture? It's my tree and I can do what I want, right?

Answer: Most tree forts are high on ambition and altitude, and low in safety and practicality. Here is a recent case that sent DNS zoning inspectors out to check on. The front yard tree fort was quite obvious to passers by. Zoning codes prohibit any such construction of play houses in the front yard and required side set backs per 295-505-3 [J]. If kids start living there, then you have another problem. If you have a doubt, you can check it out with a phone call to the Development Center. You can ask any "what if question" and receive a free reply. Call 286-8211. ☺

DNS Environmental Update

by Dave Krey

The lack of a heavy snow pack this spring meant there wasn't a big problem with litter. But people will be people, and DNS is going after those who let trash pile up in their yards.

One of the newer and more effective tools used this year is the Community Contact Letter. The two part form is a checklist type letter that cites various problems. Things included are tall grass and weeds, garbage, nuisance vehicles and other violations. The key to making it work is that a neighborhood organization makes the first contact. They discuss the problem and seek a compliance time. After a week goes by, they reinspect. If the problem remains, then a referral to DNS is made. Voluntary compliance is unusually high, about 50-80%. That's 50-80% work that DNS can apply to other areas. The extra work by the Community groups means that precious City resources are quickly focused on more serious problems. Community groups benefit from getting to know their neighborhoods and working to keeping them clean and safe.

Community groups interested in getting a Community Contact Letter of their own, should contact Todd Weiler, Public Information and Training Coordinator at tweile@milwaukee.gov. Include the name of the organization, the contact person and the phone number. DNS will send out a custom letter with a City logo on it suitable to print on any computer. Details will follow on how to use the letter and process complaints against those who do not heed the Community Contact letter. ☺

DNS to Request Changes to Fire Escape Inspection Process

Like most cities in Wisconsin, Milwaukee requires fire escapes to be inspected annually. Unlike the other cities in Wisconsin, Milwaukee imposes the additional requirement that fire escapes on buildings of three or more stories are to be inspected every five years by a certified architect or engineer. That extra margin of safety was found to be in need of some improvement.

Prompted by some media inquiries, the department sent out its commercial fire inspectors to climb 50 fire escapes in the City. The inspectors did find some violations. The most serious of the violations was a missing tread and a missing bolt. Orders were sent to the property owners and other buildings inspected by the certifying engineer were re-examined.

The violations have prompted DNS Commissioner Martin G. Collins to ask the council to approve an ordinance change seeking to allow DNS to reject critical inspection reports that it finds are faulty. Further it seeks to prohibit an architect or engineer found to have submitted faulty reports from filing future reports. A reinstatement process would be determined by the board of standards and appeals.

City inspectors stopped walking fire escapes some 15 years ago after an inspector was injured. Besides walking the escapes now, a new tracking system will be put into place. The names of the engineer or architect will be tracked as well as the expiration date of the critical exam.

There are no known injuries or fatalities on fire escapes in Milwaukee. ☺

Shaming House shows signs of progress from Page 1

Intense media scrutiny broke a 2-year deadlock in less than 24 hours. Ironically Mrs. Hornik was unaware of the unpaid court fines, building code orders and the shaming action being taken. She was instrumental in getting some action. A restoration agreement was signed by the new owner and DNS removed the sign.

The publicity also triggered numerous calls from around the country as other municipalities looked to doing a similar event in their cities. One TV network level news bureau wants to be there for when Milwaukee does it again.

The Milwaukee Housing Coalition a month later, used clippings from the media to mail to other problem landlords, threatening them that they could be next. Half of those contacted responded favorably to the coalition's request to repair their property. The Milwaukee housing Coalition is review lists of property that meet the criteria suitable for the Shaming ordinance.

Not all run down property may be eligible for the "shaming treatment." Two key ingredients are the ability to do the repairs and will the owner(s) care about the publicity? Some landlords operate as if court fines and citations are a "cost of doing business as usual". Hopefully this new approach will expand the scope and dimension of "doing business as usual" and they will start doing the right thing by fixing their properties. ☺

New NUISANCE VEHICLE brochure available

They seem to spring up after the snow melts. Hidden under the large piles of snow is a rusting old automobile. Nearly every neighborhood has one. Typically it is a car that has been in an accident and the owner has it towed home instead of to a repair facility. They are an eyesore, a health problem and are illegal.

DNS recently created a new Nuisance Vehicle brochure. The brochure contains useful information on how to deal with the problem.

Last year DNS issued orders on 6,010 vehicles. After a reinspection period 1,477 were on the property ready to be towed, another 1,343 listed as abandoned were sent to DPW for towing since the property owner had no clue who the owner was. Ultimately 816 cars were towed by DNS.

The criteria that make a nuisance vehicle eligible for towing is this...is it a nuisance and/or does it meet 3 out of five criteria?

The first cars towed immediately are those with a missing window, door or stored dangerously such as up on a rock. Those go straight to the shredder for recycling.

Next are those that meet 3 out of 5 criteria.

Those conditions are:

1. No current valid license plates displayed.
2. Unmoved for 30 days.
3. Inoperable.
4. Substantial damage such as missing certain parts, broken windows,
5. Parked on an unapproved surface.

If 3 out of the 5 above conditions exist, or it's an automatic nuisance (a window is missing), you should call the Department of Neighborhood Services and make a complaint. Complainants should be able to provide a location and a description of the offending vehicle. Typically, an inspector will check within 1-2 weeks to determine if a violation exists. Complainants names are kept confidential if requested.

For vehicles in the street or on public areas, call the DPW Tow Desk at 286-8350. For more information on the complete process, see the DNS web page. 📞



Nuisance vehicles lower property values and create harborage for animals like rats. See the new DNS brochure on how to deal with nuisance vehicles.



The bend in the steeple is most noticeable when the vertical columns left and right show the amount of tilt in the building.



Here the wrecking machine is carefully peeling off the roof in hopes the steeple will fall into the center and not shift the building southward.

Quick Response from Page 1

bit more quickly. The case in point was a church on E. Meineke Ave.

The church was over 100 years old and had been a former church, and union hall and, as of late, the home of the True Church First Born Apostolic Faith. The building had a serious defect causing it to shift to the south. The problem was first noticed in January with a raze file started in March. But within a week the building moved about a foot and was leaning against its neighbor to the south, a large duplex. Something had to be done quickly.

In a rare move, DNS issued a 24-hour raze order meaning the city was going to tear the building down the next day. On May 7th the wrecking started, The contractor said on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the most difficult, this was a 10. Since the building was already pushing against the building to the south, care had to be taken to prevent more damage. When the steeple finally fell, the porch was damaged but the rest of the duplex was saved.

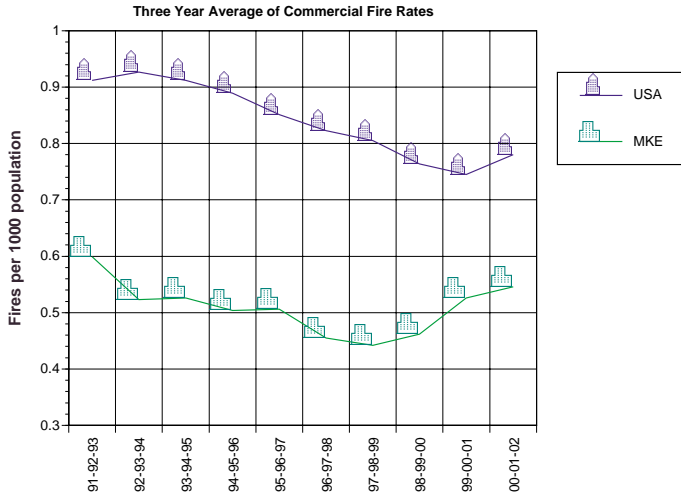
The official cause of the roof failure was unknown. However, the bolts holding the 2x12's were quite rusted and failing. A simple roof job and water tight maintenance may have prevented the premature failure. Some interior supports may have been removed, but there are no blue prints on file to prove it.

Typically most 24-hour demolition jobs are the result of a major accident or fire. Last year a bus hit a house requiring a similar kind of action. 📞

Milwaukee Commercial Fire Rate beats National Average.

Commercial buildings in Milwaukee are only half as likely to burn as compared to those elsewhere in the nation. According to numbers just released by the National Fire Protection Association, Milwaukee beats the National average when it comes to fires in Commercial and Public Buildings.

While the numbers look good for Milwaukee, both the national and local incidence of fire in commercial buildings is up. While not an exact science, it is the most earnest effort to measure the fire rate in Milwaukee as compared else where. Using a three year average to discount any one bad or good year, here are the fire rates per 1,000 population.



Compiled by City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services V1.0 TNW 8/20/03
DATA SOURCES: National-Fire Protection Association, Milwaukee-Milwaukee Fire Department

The data collects numbers reported to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the Milwaukee Fire Department MFD. There are some discrepancies within the categories that NFPA uses and MFD. For instance, arson fires are tracked but DNS fire inspections would not impact such behavior. The NFPA categories included in the data are public assembly, educational, institutional, apartments, Stores, Office, Industry, and storage. MFD uses a National Fire Incident Reporting System that uses even more categories. A corresponding set is matched against the NFPA categories. Interestingly, the 9/11 attack, which totalled a \$33 billion loss, did not impact the national numbers so much.

Population changes are also variables. Except every 10 years during an actual census, estimates are used. Since both systems are voluntary, how other fire departments define their data could cause some variation.

None the less, it appears Milwaukee continues to stay below the national numbers. Reasons may include the annual fire inspections that inspectors conduct, educational efforts by staff, and the sound application of building codes and permits. As fire suppression systems get better at detecting fires early and limiting its growth, an equal effort will have to be made to limit the inherent error in human nature. As the tragic fires of Chicago and Rhode Island illustrate, human error can circumvent the best fire protection systems in the world. ☺

LandLord Training News

The Landlord Training Program "Keeping Illegal and Destructive Activity Out of Rental Property" is starting its 10th year as of June 3, 2003.

To date we have trained over 11,000 landlords and property managers, representing over 200,000 rental units. To reach this incredible number, many hours were spent working at nights and on weekends. We have done classes in park pavilions, church basements – both big and small, city buildings, universities, community based organizations, etc...

The Landlord Training Program is now presented in Spanish. DNS is currently offering two sessions in Spanish. A video tape version is available through the public library system and financial institutions. Volunteers from the community; US Bank, South Organizing Committee, Milwaukee Police Department, and Select Milwaukee, all chipped in to help provide the translation for the program. The City of Milwaukee Channel 25 videotaped the last program, and after editing, the tape will be made available on video and DVD at all public libraries, financial institutions, and housing groups that require our program for loans.

We aren't stopping there. Recently we were approached by the Hmong/American Association to assist them in translating the program into Hmong and Lao.

We believe this is the very first Spanish Landlord Training Program in the country, and the first one provided in Hmong and Lao.

The program in English, is also available on video and DVD, through the library system, for those citizens who can't make our regularly scheduled classes. A complete listing of all classes is available on the DNS web site. ☺

Placard in the nick of time!

A property at 2851 N. 16th St. had been a nuisance for some time. Thanks to a persistent neighbor, condemnation Supervisor Ronald Roberts met inspector Jon Lang at the property. Minnie McAfee, the neighbor, insisted the house was a death trap and that it should be condemned.

Her alderman called Roberts, who called Jon Lang. Together they gained access and inspected the interior. As a result of their inspection, Lang placarded the unit due to defective electrical wiring.

One week later, the fire department responded to an electrical fire that ignited the wood framing at this vacant building. Roberts said, "Thank God the tenants were gone! It occurs to me that sometimes our efforts do hit the mark." In this case, a tragedy was avoided due to Lang's efforts.

The building is now condemned. ☺

DNS FACTOID

Number of Court Cases brought by DNS June 1, 2002 - May 31, 2003

Citations

Case Adjudicated: 665

Judgement Amount: \$107,846.79

Summons and Complaints

Cases Adjudicated: 1565

Judgement Amount: \$604,074.00

Total Cases

Cases Adjudicated: 2230

Judgement Amounts: \$711,920.79

DNS to Enforce new Sign Ordinance with Education in the First Year

Have you seen one of those corner stores and you are not sure what kind of a business it is by all the signs outside? It's just one of the problems being addressed by a new sign ordinance that took effect in October of 2002. Research has shown that customers are confused when so many signs cover the entrance to a business. It also suggests that the interior is just as cluttered as the exterior and customers will shop someplace else. There are also CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) issues. With windows blocked out customers, would be unaware of possible criminal activity going on inside.

All permanent signs require a permit from the Milwaukee Development Center. If your business is in a locally designated historic district, the Historic Preservation Commission must also approve the sign. Exterior signs made of plastic, cardboard, or flexible plastic are not allowed. Banners are not allowed.

How large can my permanent signs be? How many can I have? The amount of signage you may display depends on the zoning district in which the property is located.

In the most restrictive zoning districts, businesses are allowed to have a maximum of 18 square feet of wall signage. This can be one sign or multiple signs; however, the total of all the signs added together may not exceed 18 square feet. In the most restrictive zoning districts, businesses may also have one projecting wall sign, no more than 12 square feet in area. If you have a non-lighted awning, you can have 10 square feet of signage on the awning. If you have an internally lighted, translucent awning, you are allowed to have only 5 square feet of signage on the awning.

Any information or graphics relating to your business painted directly on an exterior wall will be treated as signs, and counted in the calculation of how much signage you are allowed to have.

Some zoning districts allow more signage. Call the Milwaukee Development Center at (414)286-8210 to determine the amount of signage allowed for your building. You must provide the exact address of your building.

Are temporary signs OK? Temporary signs are typically paper or plastic signs and displays that advertise special sales or promotions. Temporary signs are allowed under these conditions:

1. The sign must be installed inside the window, not on the exterior of the building.
2. The sign must be displayed for no more than 30 days.
3. All temporary signs, added together, may cover no more than 25% (one-fourth) of the business's windows.

Temporary signs do not require a permit. However, if the temporary signs you install do not meet these three conditions, you are subject to a citation from the building inspector. If you currently have temporary signs that are mounted outdoors, have been up for more than 30 days, or cover more than 25% of the window area, you must remove them now.

Special rules exist for store windows. Milwaukee ordinances require windows on retail businesses. At a minimum, windows must exist in a clear vision zone that starts about 3 feet from the floor and



Store fronts such as this one will need to change their signs in order to comply with the new sign ordinance in Milwaukee.

extends vertically to the spot 7 feet above the floor.

New buildings must be designed and built to meet these ordinances. For existing buildings, existing windows must be maintained and may be enlarged, but generally may not be reduced in size. Existing windows may not be painted over, blocked or filled in to restrict the view into the business from the street.

The window requirement affects the amount and type of signs that may be displayed in windows. It also affects what fixtures may be placed in front of windows inside the store. Here are the rules:

1. Only two kinds of permanent signs are allowed in windows: individual letters painted on clear window glass, and neon signs consisting of individual letters. The permanent sign in the window may not obscure the view into the store in the vision zone. Permanent signs in the window may cover up to 25% (one-fourth) of the window area.
2. Display racks, point of purchase displays, and other items that significantly obscure the view in and out of the store may not be placed in front of windows in the vision zone.
3. Temporary signs may cover no more than 25% (one-fourth) of the store's window area.

What is an illegal sign? Any permanent sign that was hung or mounted on a building or in a window without a sign permit is an illegal sign. Any temporary sign that doesn't meet the conditions listed on the previously is an illegal sign. This is true even if a previous operator of the business put up the sign.

Anything put up for more than 30 days that displays the name of the business, services or products offered, special promotions, or even graphics depicting products is a sign and needs a permit. There are some small exceptions, such as small, neatly applied emblems relating to credit cards accepted, business associations, and hours of operation.

What should I do if I have an illegal sign at my business? If no permits exist, you may either remove the sign, or apply for a permit for the sign. The permit will be granted if the size and other factors are allowed by City ordinances. If the existing sign does not meet the ordinances, you'll be required to remove it or alter it to meet the law. If you fail to take action to correct or remove illegal signs, you will receive a citation from the building inspector.

NSS TRIVIA

Since going online in August of 1999, people have accessed our Neighborhood Services System (NSS) via the web more than 3,000,000 times. That's saved a lot of phone calls!



The artist Ving Yeng Vang (Left) poses with her friend next to the sculpture of a cat she made. The Cat's caption..."Graffiti Stinks!" Vang attends Prince of Peace School.

Anti-graffiti Campaign focuses on Trash Bins

The streets of "old Milwaukee" have something new. The familiar green City of Milwaukee trash bins in select neighborhoods have been given a face lift of sorts. In their place, about a dozen bins have been replaced by decorated trash cans. It was the featured theme for this year's anti-graffiti campaign.

The artful bins are placed in neighborhoods where community groups or store owners contributed to the materials to paint the trash cans. The bin reflect some part of the neighborhood that they are placed in. The project is also a great outlet for "real artists" hoping to spread their colorful work in a more meaningful way.

Selected cans and other posters and sculpture related to anti-graffiti were put on display for the public in City hall. City officials came out to thanks the students and remind the public about being vigilant about removing graffiti.

DNS has brochures on graffiti removal techniques available on its web site. Just go to the City's home page www.milwaukee.gov and click on CITY DEPARTMENTS towards the bottom. Click on NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES, then SECTIONS, then ANTI-GRAFFITI.

Citizens are reminded to call the emergency number 911 when they witness vandals in the act of committing graffiti. All other instances should go to MPD at 933-4444. ☺



Public officials gathered in City Hall to praise the efforts of the students who painted the trash cans and created the anti-graffiti art work.

New Sign Rules from Page 5

How can I find out if any of my existing signs are illegal? The existing signs on your business may remain if they were installed with permits. If you cannot find permits in your files for each of the signs on your building, you can check the city files at the Milwaukee Development Center to verify that you or the previous operator took out permits. Permit files are available for public inspection from 8 am. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Development Center is located at 809 N. Broadway, first floor.

What are the penalties for illegal signs? If a building inspector orders removal of illegal signs, and the property owner does not remove them, the owner faces significant financial penalties. The owner is subject to reinspection fees that range from \$50 to \$300 per reinspection. An owner who failed to remove illegal signs for a year would be charged reinspection fees of nearly \$3,000. The owner also is subject to citations that carry a fine of up to \$320 each, and a municipal court fine of up to \$150 per day.

When I close or move my business, what should I do about the signs? When a business leaves a location, the signs pertinent to that business must be removed. If you are a tenant, talk to your landlord to decide whether you or the landlord will remove the signs.

If a new business will be moving in immediately, a box-type sign cabinet maybe re-used by the new business operator by inserting a new "face" in the sign. A permit is required to put this new face in. If a new business is not moving in within 90 days of the former leaving, a blank panel may be inserted temporarily until a new business rents the space. In no case can a sign box be left with a broken or missing sign panel for any length of time.

In cases where totally new signs or awnings are being put up for a business, the old signs they replace must be completely removed. If signs belonging to a former business are not removed, the property owner will receive a citation from the building inspector.

Where do I apply for sign permits? To apply for a permit, you need to present drawings and measurements of the proposed signs, photos of your business, and a permit fee to the Milwaukee Development Center, located on the 1st floor at 809 N. Broadway. The Development Center is open from 7:30 am. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Call (414) 286-8210 for information about how many and what types of signs you may install. Information about the permit process is available on the Development Center's web site, www.mkedcd.org/build. Click "customer information and applications" and consult the article titled "Signs."

DNS is going to use an "educational" approach for most cases in the first year. The greatest effort will be to remove most of the clutter and banners used as exterior signs. They generate the greatest complaints. Businesses are subject to citations from a building inspector if they have more signs than the code allows, types of signs not allowed by the code, signs installed without permits, and damaged or abandoned signs. In July, a letter was sent to beer distributors informing them of the new sign code requirements. Later this year a letter will be sent to all the licensed business owners of gas stations, grocery stores, liquor stores, and take-out restaurants. This letter will inform them of the code changes. Next year, during the annual fire inspection, the inspector will inform the operators of the sign restrictions and request compliance. If DNS receives a complaint, orders will be issued to comply. If an owner/operator does not comply, citations and court fines could apply. ☺

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How can I improve the signs on my business?

Following these guidelines will help you achieve signage that conveys a positive image of your business.

1. Many buildings were designed with sign bands. These are areas above the front door with space for signage. If your building has a sign band, install your sign in the band rather than at some other spot.
2. If you want signage on a building awning, choose an unlighted cloth style, rather than a lighted plastic model. You'll be allowed to devote a larger portion of the awning to your message, and your building will have a more distinctive look than would be achieved with a "pre-fab" plastic awning.
3. If the windows of your business have been blocked in or painted over, open them up! Remove the paint! Install clear glass that allows your customers to see inside your business.
4. Avoid painting sign information directly on the wall. Painted wall signs are vulnerable to graffiti, and they're hard to maintain.
5. If you've got a broken sign at your business, repair or remove it. Broken signs are illegal, and they send a negative message about your business and your neighborhood.

City Code Now On-Line

The City Clerks Office has all of the City Charter Code of Ordinances on line. Besides searching on-line by key word, the entire code or chapter can be printed from the PDF and Microsoft Word documents. Go to the Frequently Request button on the home page of www.milwaukee.gov or use the URL of

<http://www.ci.mil.wi.us/citygov/council/isysintro.htm>



A family at the Juneteenth celebration on Martin Luther King Dr. receives free information at the DNS and NIDC table. Staffing the table left to right are Willis Neal, Victor Drake, and Judy Carson.

CLEANS SWEEP II Includes Fire Protection This Year

DNS along with four other City departments exerted an extra effort to get rid of some crime and grime. Things like street crime, nuisance vehicles, litter and tall grass were the targets. New this year is fire safety!

It's the second effort for Cooperative Law Enforcement and Neighborhood Services Sweep II or CLEANS Sweep. It is a cooperative venture between four City Departments and a major community service group. The Milwaukee Police Department (MPD), the Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS), Milwaukee's Sanitation Bureau and new this year the Milwaukee Fire Department will work in concert with Community Partners. The Department of City Development and DNS identified the target areas with significant investment opportunity. CLEANS Sweep II is a way to keep the positive momentum going. By linking City services together, the impact is immediate and more visible. Below are the results from the Cleans Sweep II Program.

Area	Clean-Up Orders	Nuisance Vehicle Orders
Havenwoods TIN	16	19
Metcalf Park TIN/ West North Avenue CPA	41	17
Midtown Triangle TIN/ Lindsay Heights CPA	97	22
Harambee Riverwest TIN	19	2
Harley-Davidson CPA	6	9
Layton Boulevard, West Neighbors, National Park TIN	6	3
Greenfield Corridor TIN	11	7
Muskego Heights TIN, St. Adalberts TIN, Lincoln Muskego CPA	99	17
Hampton-Atkinson TIN	15	0
TOTALS	310	96

This program is one of many steps in the City's new Strategic Housing Plan which is available on-line at the City's web site at www.milwaukee.gov. The CLEANS Sweep project started with drug sweeps by Milwaukee Police and DNS nuisance inspectors noting violations. DNS inspectors went through issuing orders for garbage, graffiti, and nuisance vehicles. DPW Sanitation crews picked up large items and issued orders for uncut grass. Crews from Forestry, Street sweeping and Parking enforcement were involved in the effort. The Fire department visited homes checking smoke detectors. The sweep continued through May 31, 2003. This project utilized discretionary services of the various departments and resulted in no additional budget costs. Community Partners alerted residents about the sweep coming through their neighborhoods. Milwaukee Police report that in September 2003 crime was on average down 30% from last year in the impacted TINS.

One remaining program is the directed special pick-ups. That program focuses only on nuisance and garbage issues. DNS Nuisance inspectors are going through neighborhoods selected by aldermen. That effort will finish this Fall. ©

Commissioner's Corner

Invisible Public Service

by DNS Commissioner Martin G. Collins

A lot of what we do at DNS involves the process of motivating property owners and others to comply with the standards set in our city, otherwise known as our codes. It is a challenging job to change people's priorities. The process requires good salesmanship skills, patience and sometimes a tin ear to weather the venting that we sometimes have to endure in the process. Sympathy and a helpful attitude will bring some around, while others remain invincibly ignorant and end up seeing the judge and a big reinspection fee bill. "Good faith is given where good faith is shown" is our guide when working with owners to get them into compliance.

Alas, there are many cases where obtaining compliance takes a lot longer than complainants think appropriate. Take the case of the typical house in need of exterior repairs. We investigate the complaint, issue orders, often have a discussion with the owner, reinspect, perhaps give an extension if there is progress or a very good reason, assess reinspection fees, send it to court, get a forfeiture and sometimes we have to reissue the order again. All this time, the complainant sees no repairs being made and, unless they have checked the web, they have probably concluded that we have ignored their complaint. The house looks the same! In this regard, our services are invisible. People do not find value in services that appear to do nothing. That perception is often reflected to their elected officials at budget time.

We are not like the Fire Department whose equipment and sirens lets people know when they are in action. What can we do to strip away the veil of invisibility and show what we do? First, to the extent that time permits, inspectors can call the complainant back and let them know what actions have been taken as a result of their complaint. A return call can turn an unhappy citizen into a customer who values your services. The complaint intake staff does a great job by advising complainants that they will be called so don't let them down!

Complainants can also be told that they can monitor progress on their complaint by periodically checking out the property data location on our website. We have just celebrated our 3 millionth hit on our NSS records, clear proof that it works to get information out to the public. If they do not have web access, complainants can be told to call back the department if they want an update.

We have started some additional methods of communicating what we have done. Nuisance Control and Zoning inspectors have day glow colored placards to apply to nuisance vehicles, to cars in "instant used car lots", to vehicle violations deserving of reinspection fees and to fences behind which illegal storage occurs. Those placards not only inform the code violators of the department's action, but they also let the neighbors know that DNS is taking action. I have already heard back from both elected officials and citizens at community meetings that they knew we were working on their complaints because they had seen "the signs". Inspectors have told me that the placards are very effective in opening the dialog that is needed to get to resolution.

Don't hide your efforts! The more the public understands what we can do and cannot do, the more they value our sometimes "Invisible Public Service". ☺



(Clockwise upper left) The winning team with their trophy, Mack Hughes wins MVP, the piñata attracted the kids, and below the losing team is out standing in their field.

DNS 2003 Baseball Picnic a hit with staff and family!

By Tracy Williams

August 23rd was a beautiful day – blue skies and sunny. The picnic was a great time for all that came. People representing all sections of DNS plus staff from NIDC and Sanitation Call Center (at the west end of the 10th floor) attended. Volunteers came early to set up the large tent of Clyde Hutchinsens's. Lots of soda and water along with meat, buns and condiments were provided. Everyone brought a dish to pass, including different salads and desserts.

First the kids got to play a baseball game amongst themselves with a few adults helping with the pitching and to assist the littler ones. Kids from approximately 6 years old to 15 years old played and had a great time. Next there was food. Big thanks to Brian Kaufman for taking on the cooking responsibilities. Also a big thanks to Brian Vincent and the plumber's union for allowing us to use their beautiful extra large grill. Plenty of brats, Italians, hamburgers and hot dogs were on hand.

This year rather than play several games, there was one baseball game between Lake Tower and the Muni Building. Tim Temperly coordinated the different teams and volunteered to umpire the game. Finally the game between the two offices took place. The winner was Lake Tower with the final score of 16 to 10 after 7 innings. The most valuable player honor went to Mack Hughes for his great performance in the field. While the adults were playing baseball, the kids got to swing at two piñatas. I don't know who constructed them but the first piñata took a long time to finally break open. After the piñata activity, grab bags were also given to all the kids. The picnic wrapped up at about 6:00 PM.

I want to thank all the volunteers to help coordinate this year's picnic. I also want to thank the unions, coffee/soda clubs and upper management for their donations. Next year we will be changing the date of the picnic to the Saturday after Labor Day – Saturday, September 11, 2004. We hope you can join us! (I know it will be on 9/11 but the only thing that will be flying will be the baseballs.) ☺