

Automated Code Enforcement: Long Overdue

Recall the classic television shows that aired in the 1960's and how towns were portrayed to be perfect quaint places where nothing went wrong; minus the occasional boy accidentally breaking a window with a baseball. They painted the picture of what is now considered the American dream. The white picket fence, happy neighbors on the street and not a leaf out of place in the yard. What was it that made these towns so great? Community harmony. Achieving it is the objective shared by every municipality across the country. However, achieving harmony is an active process that requires two things:

1. Everyone abides by the same laws = Compliance
2. Enforcement processes for those who do not = Enforcement

Code enforcement officers hold the keys to driving successful development and growth within municipalities. They help to preserve safety standards, protect the environment, and maintain property values throughout the community.

Some code violations like landscaping, trash, and sidewalk maintenance are common to most cities and towns across the country. On average, overgrown vegetation and weeds account for 27.9% of violations (percentage based on a nationwide sample of small to mid-sized cities). This is due to the fact that most areas have indigenous vegetation that can get large enough to obstruct roadways and sidewalks, provide a habitat for vermin, and irritate neighbors by impacting property values.

The second most common offense is solid waste or rubbish that has not been properly disposed of. Some examples are abandoned vehicles, broken appliances, old furniture, and other large unsightly items. Combined, these make up an average of 21.8% of citations issued.

After that are sidewalk citations including snow removal and cracked pavement both of which could result in major injuries. These would be more common if every town across the country had sidewalks and experienced colder conditions. These citations are generally more common in areas farther north but they still account for nearly 11% of all citations nationwide.

Other violations differ based on certain variables, like topographical area of the municipality [for instance the people of Las Vegas will probably never have to rake leaves], difference in municipal codes and also in overarching objectives of the municipalities themselves. Each municipality has a different reason for the way they have written their codes and ordinances, some places want to attract tourists while others are more interested in attracting permanent residents. The majority of the differences in the codes that certain municipalities emphasized were based off of the geographic area. The more rural areas, where tourists go to hike and enjoy the scenery, tend to have more environmentally friendly codes. On the other hand, urban areas tend to be more focused on property value and maintenance.

Over the past few years, there has been substantial growth in the amount of code enforcement cases that have been opened. The close rate on these cases, however, has remained relatively steady year after year. These opened cases started rising in 2008 due to the increase in home foreclosures. A large amount of abandoned dwellings were left unmaintained by the banks because so many homes had been foreclosed in a short period of time, causing property values to plummet and reach lows that had

not been seen in years. This crisis was so substantial there is still remnants of it today in some of the more affected and depressed areas of the nation.

Despite the uptick in the amount of code enforcement cases across the country, municipalities are continuously making budget cuts. Code enforcement staff have seen reductions as high as 60 percent according to the California Association of Code Enforcement Officers. "When I started eight years ago, there were about 100 cases and four positions which grew to five in the department. Now there are two of us, and we have 503 cases." (Todd Barr, Code Compliance Officer, Calaveras County)¹ Officers, now more than ever, are taking on larger workloads and having to work more efficiently in order to handle the load. Technology has started to play a large role in how code enforcement officers conduct day to day business.

Advancements in code enforcement technology have come a long way in the past few years. Upgrades in mobile devices allow officers to generate citations and upload data in real time. These devices include handheld printers that allow officers to print tickets rather than hand write them, cutting the citation time. The major benefit to on-the-spot citation printing is that officers no longer have to go back to the office to transcribe paper tickets, they can upload data in real time. Most of the new handheld devices have cameras allowing evidence to be stored and uploaded. Previously, evidence was gathered via cell phone or personal camera or even just a written description, which caused many cases to get dropped due to lack of quality evidence. Another desirable feature in electronic solutions is the ability to identify repeat offenders on the spot and escalate the violation process via scofflaw.

Harmonious living is dependent on municipal codes and the people that enforce them. Code enforcement officers are receiving more work and are becoming more and more scarce. Technology is one answer in helping these officers maintain a high standard of living and maintain our neighborhoods.

¹ California Association of Code Enforcement Officers. 2009. "The Case for Code Enforcement Funding How Budget Cuts Impact California Communities." California Association of Code Enforcement Officers. September 23.

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