



Bellevue Neighborhood Mediation Program

425-452-4091

Car parts, weeds and tarps

What to do about neighborhood eyesores

By Michele Stanelun and Andrew Kidde

Let's say you are putting your house on the market, and your realtor says that getting a good price for your house depends a lot on "curb appeal." So, you pull out the blackberries by the drive, replace them with shrubs and beauty bark, and repaint your front door. These improvements help, but they also give rise to a depressing and growing awareness: your neighborhood looks terrible! It never bothered you much before, but now it seems intolerable. The couple next door doesn't seem to care that their yard is overgrown with weeds, tall grass, and sprawling bushes; and their compost pile is attracting rats. Plus they need to repaint the trim on their house (what an ugly shade of mauve). To make matters worse, the house down the street is an eyesore -- junk scattered in their front yard, including a rusty old refrigerator. They also have an old car with a flat tire parked in the drive, and you just bet that it doesn't even run. It looks like they could push the car into the carport—if they moved the stuff out first. At least they could put up a tarp, but that isn't going to make the neighborhood look any better.

Is there anything you can do about all this? Are there laws governing these eyesores? Who do you call? Can anyone help you communicate with these people? This article is written to answer these questions, and offer some guidance on dealing with messy neighbors.

First, Bellevue does have laws that deal with some of these "eyesores," but not all of them. These laws are located in the Bellevue City Code. Several sections of the Code do apply to the situations described above. For example, Chapter 9.11, the *Anti Litter Code*, says that "The owner, occupant, or person in control of any private property or public place shall at all times maintain the premises free of litter..." The neighbor down the street

may well be violating this part of the code with their "junk scattered around the yard." But this law may not apply to the neighbor with the compost bin, since compost bins are specifically exempted (we'll get back to the compost bin later, on account of the rat issue) Another section of the code, Chapter 9.09, *Abatement of Junk Vehicles*, may apply to the neighbor who has an old car with a flat tire. This law requires that vehicles need to be "operable," or they need to be properly screened from

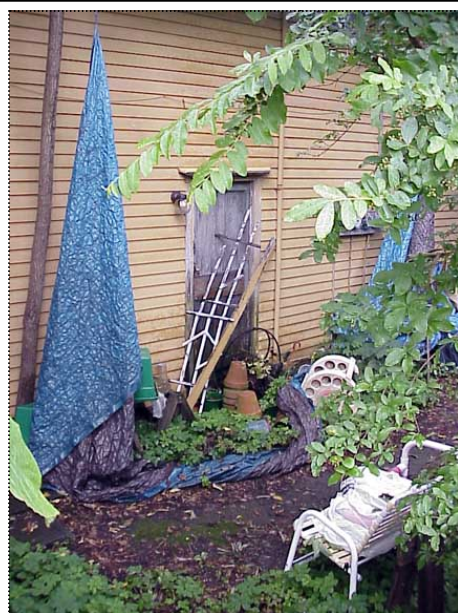
view.

So, some of these neighbors may be violating the law. "Well," you think, "what are they waiting for?... Isn't the law supposed to be enforced?" It turns out that these sections of the code are "complaint driven," meaning that nothing happens unless someone reports it.

But wait... before you run to your phone, let's think this through a little more. Remember, some of those eyesores are addressed by the law, and some of them are not. Your neighbor with the overgrown and weedy yard -- sorry, no law to prevent that. The Fire Department may find that tall, dry grass is a fire hazard and order the owner to cut it, but that won't do you any good in the wet springtime. Some overgrown shrubs may be deemed traffic hazards if they block a view of a sign or driveway,

but that's not likely to help either. It turns out that it's perfectly legal to have a yard-o-weeds. And that ugly shade of mauve that your neighbor's house is painted? ... as they say in code compliance, "we don't regulate ugly."

So, before you file a complaint with Code Compliance, you might want to talk things over with your neighbors to see if you can persuade them to deal with the legal eyesores as well as the illegal ones. It may be pretty hard to have this discussion after you have called Code Compliance on them. Even if you have only one



Just some of my stuff... or horrible eyesore?

concern, and it is clearly addressed by the code, the Code Compliance process may not get you what you want. Remember the neighbor's rusty old car? It may just need some air in the tires, and... *voilà*... legal.

Negotiating with your neighbor could well result in a better solution for you than getting Code Compliance to enforce. There are three main reasons for this. First as we have noted with the old car, the Code Compliance solution may not address your concerns. You don't care if the car is operable, you care about the appearance. In a negotiation, you can be clear about what you really care about, and make sure it doesn't get lost in how the issue is addressed. The owner of the rusty car might be willing to park it in the car port, or the back alley. Second, negotiating a solution gives you an opportunity to invent solutions that benefit both parties. For example, you might suggest to your neighbor with the tall grass that you'd be willing to have your landscaper cut their grass for a couple of months, if they would be willing to repaint their trim. Remember, your realtor says that curb appeal may translate into thousands of dollars, so offering to cut their grass could be a real bargain. Third, a negotiated solution is more likely to maintain neighborly relations. While this may not be a significant factor for someone moving away from a neighborhood – it usual is for people who aren't moving, and some of them also have concerns with the appearance of their neighbors' property.

Despite all the reasons for pursuing negotiation, perhaps you are not comfortable approaching your neighbor. In that case, call the Bellevue Neighborhood Mediation Program at 452-4091. We can coach you on how to negotiate with your neighbor, or we could provide a mediator who would facilitate a face to face meeting with your neighbor.

Do remember though, some things are not negotiable – especially concerns about health and safety. Re-

member that old freezer in your neighbor's front yard? That might be interesting to curious children—and being old and lockable, could result in a child being locked in the freezer and potentially suffocating. According to the City Code (in Chapter 9.10.030 part 3 Paragraph F) the freezer is an “attractive nuisance” and “dangerous to children.” If you talk to your neighbor about that hazard and he or she doesn't deal with it promptly, you should report that violation to Code Compliance for everyone's sake. And what about that rat infested compost pile, what if your neighbor won't deal with that? It turns out that Bellevue City Code has a relatively new ordinance on rat infestation that imposes heavy fines for those who do not comply with a notice to abate a confirmed infestation. That situation may also be a non-negotiable item for you, and you may choose the enforcement route fairly early in the game.

If you want to find effective solutions to neighborhood eyesore problems, it helps to think though the options. First investigate these questions:

- Does the Bellevue City Code address this eyesore?
- If so, does the remedy that the City will impose address your concern?
- What if you have several concerns with this neighbor and the City Code only addresses some of them?
- Might there be some solutions that would benefit both parties?
- What kind of relationship would you like with this neighbor in future?
- Are there health and safety concerns or other concerns that are not negotiable?

Once you have answered these questions, you can plan how to address your neighborhood eyesore problem in a way that is most likely to get you the result you want.

Contact information:

Code Compliance: 425-452-4570
Mediation: 425-452-4091