On parking markers, Southie, city dig in

By Donovan Slack, Globe Staff  |  December 30, 2004

In a battle that shows no signs of waning soon, Mayor Thomas M. Menino dispatched crews to South Boston yesterday to clear away anything and everything that residents placed in the streets to stake claims to parking spaces they had cleared of snow.

But just as quickly as the jaws of city garbage trucks crushed the myriad shopping carts, traffic cones, and furniture used as markers, many residents replaced them with new parking-space holders.

"I've got more barrels than he's got trucks," said James M. Kelly, the neighborhood's city councilor, who used a trash barrel yesterday to reserve his pristinely shoveled spot near N Street. City crews moved his barrel to the sidewalk yesterday, but a neighbor moved it back.

It's an unwritten law almost as old as the automobile in densely populated Boston neighborhoods: You shovel it, you own it. But Menino decided last December that the vigilante justice sometimes meted out for violating the law of the streets -- slashed tires, broken windows, or keyed car doors -- was getting out of hand. So he began ordering city crews to pick up parking
space markers 48 hours after a major snowfall.

The new policy was tested after several snowstorms last year, and some residents, especially in South Boston, complained loudly, threatening to disregard it. Now both sides appear to be digging in for a long and perhaps costly fight. The city will have to foot the bill if extra crews must collect items left in parking spaces, and there are fees to dump them at private disposal sites.

"I have the answer to the whole thing," said Ed Lane, an East Seventh Street resident whose barrels were cleared from a parking space about noon. "I'll put my toilet out there, because the city does not pick up plumbing."

The standoff is aggravating old fault lines between City Hall and one of the city's most insular and, some say, strong-willed neighborhoods. Councilor Kelly has led fierce neighborhood fights against the mayor before and isn't backing down on this one.

"One of the things we don't need is city government interfering with a policy that was created by the neighborhood and passed down from generation to generation," Kelly said. "Are there some people that overdo it, that put a barrel out till summertime? Well, there are other people in the neighborhood that make those corrections."

In South Boston, which often sees itself as a neighborhood that makes its own rules, most residents appear to be with Kelly.

Lane, who tried unsuccessfully to have city trash pickers dispose of his defunct john last week, lashed out at the mayor, saying he is a Hyde Park resident who doesn't understand.

"He has an Expedition and a driveway," Lane snapped, straightening his Red Sox cap and heading for his backyard to retrieve the toilet.

He and other Seventh Street residents gathered yesterday on the corner of N Street, listing the items they could place in the street, things that over the years city garbage collectors wouldn't take. While they waited for a city garbage truck picking up markers to leave, when they planned to put out new markers, the group came up with a sizable list: among them, refrigerators, washers and dryers, paint cans, televisions, tires, and car batteries.

Bill Collins -- who put a blue recycling tub in a space in front of his Seventh Street house, replacing a barrel that had been taken by the city minutes before -- said the mayor has thrown down the gauntlet at the wrong time.

"It's an election year!" he said. "We'll be changing our votes."

Menino did not return calls seeking comment yesterday. His spokesman, Seth Gitell, maintained that the mayor's policy would stand. Gitell said city crews would be back on the streets today, picking up parking space markers. In the future, he said, trash collectors will harvest parking space markers as they make their rounds.

"They're going to continue the work of removing objects that are blocking parking spaces," Gitell said. "The streets of the city belong to all the people."

Shortly after 1 p.m. yesterday, a garbage truck made its way down East Eighth Street. A man who gave his name only as Neal, wearing a jacket with Capitol Waste Services on it, ran from one side of the street to the other, picking up the milk crates, folding metal chairs, wooden dining chairs, lawn chairs, cones, and shopping carts that littered the street. As the jaws of the truck closed on the objects, the crackle and snap echoed a half block away. The man said he was just doing his job.

"It's professional," he said, before jumping over a 2-foot pile of snow to retrieve a lawn chair on the sidewalk, not even yet in use as a marker.

Standing across the street, Joan Hayward said she couldn't believe her eyes. Hayward moved to Florida from South Boston 18 years ago, but is visiting her son in Boston this week. She said no mayor she knew would ever have touched this "Southie tradition."

"Menino, shame on you," she said. "I think it's just terrible."

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