Menino guarded on law of the shovel

No crackdown yet on saving of spaces

By Michael Levenson, Globe Correspondent | January 28, 2005

Will he or won't he?

A fresh sprinkling of snow yesterday -- followed by armies of South Boston residents toting lawn chairs, laundry hampers, and orange cones -- raised the question: Will Mayor Thomas M. Menino stick to his guns and crack down on the parking spot markers that are a Boston tradition?

Spokesman Seth Gitell wasn't saying.

"We're still in a snow emergency," Gitell said, repeatedly dodging requests to clarify the mayor's position. "That means the city has some public safety priorities that supersede, at this time, the discussion of the space marker rule."

In a circumspect declaration that suggested the sensitivity with which the mayor is approaching the issue this election year, Gitell added, "Ample time will exist for discussion and dissemination of that rule."

Consider the stakes, as described by Frank Doran, who shoveled out a space for his wife's car yesterday outside their South Boston home.

"If the Mayor did it now, there'd be war," Doran said.

Plus, "they've got bigger things to worry about," said South Boston resident Scott Marshall, pointing to snow-covered garbage bags on the curb. "How about picking up the trash?"

Early this winter, Menino declared his intention to challenge Boston civic tradition and dispatch crews to remove the parking markers. Trying to appease residents, Menino suggested a 48-hour grace period for shovelers to reserve their spots with lawn furniture, before crews would take them away.

He sounded resolute at the time. "The streets of the city belong to all the people," he said through a spokesman.

Yet this week's whopper of a storm appears to have tossed out the old rules or at least sent the mayor scurrying. It's easy to understand why. Even a small storm a month ago triggered ugly battles between City Hall and South Boston residents after city crews stormed through the neighborhood, picking up and crushing the makeshift placeholders.

The blizzard has pained municipalities from Boston to Provincetown. Yesterday, local officials
were still being flooded with calls about unplowed streets, leaky roofs, and fender-benders.

Cape residents sounded especially fed up. Constant snowfall, whipping winds, and near whiteout conditions have turned their peninsula of normally mild temperatures into a mess of snowplows, police cruisers, and snaking traffic jams in even the smallest town centers.

Some roads resembled bobsled tracks, cars backed up bumper to bumper in front of shops and cafes, and sidewalks turned into tunnels sandwiched between shoulder-high embankments.

Police shut Route 6 from Truro to Provincetown, because of whiteout conditions, while students savored their fourth snow day. By this morning, 3 to 6 more inches were expected in some areas.

"This is getting ridiculous," said Tom Haugh, 47, who was working behind the counter in Country Liquors in Hyannis, a line of cars backed up on Main Street outside his window.

"All we're doing is shoveling. Every day, you go out and shovel, and try to come to work, and shovel some more."

Amy O'Hara, the office manager at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, said she spent four hours shoveling out her car and others on Wednesday, only to see flakes falling yesterday. The Cape already has some 3 feet of snow from Sunday's blizzard and a fresh topping of 2 to 5 inches that fell Wednesday.

Temperatures are not expected to rise above freezing until Sunday, meaning that nature will be of little help in melting the snow.

Across Massachusetts, concerns are growing about poor people freezing in their homes. Action for Boston Community Development, an antipoverty group, reported that some 18,000 low-income households in Boston, Brookline, and Newton have spent their winter fuel assistance from the federal government.

Households, including about 7,200 headed by elderly or disabled residents, receive up to $527 in fuel aid, but that lasts only about 3 or 4 weeks at current prices, and many residents are resorting to space heaters or stoves, or heading to shelters for warmth, said Robert M. Coard, ABCD's president and chief executive.

Coard called on the Bush administration to release $200 million in fuel assistance, saying, "It's very cold and it's getting worse."

Dorchester resident Debora Dooley was among those worried yesterday. The 35-year-old receptionist said she and her husband, a construction worker, have received $495 in federal fuel aid and some money from the state, but may not have enough to keep their five children warm.

"I have an 8-week-old baby, and if you run out of oil, it could make the pipes freeze," Dooley said. "So I don't want anything to happen like that. We'd have nowhere to go."

Globe correspondent Madison Park and Tracy Jan of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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