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Doggie deposits flagged in city clean water push

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On the hunt for pet waste in Wilmington's Halyburton Park, Jennifer Butler said the art of spotting doggie doo isn't very complicated.

"You can generally see it," said the city's stormwater education program coordinator. "But sometimes the smell is the first indication."

However, it can get a bit more challenging in the fall.

"It's harder now with all of the pine needles down," Butler said, adding that you also sometimes have to differentiate between pet and wild animal waste.

But once found, there's even less skill involved in flagging it.

"You hold your nose and push it down hard," said stormwater education intern Geoff Goss, straddling a few dog droppings that, well, at least didn't seem fresh as he planted the bright yellow flag.

Ninety minutes later, 46 such flags lined the paths around Halyburton – all "created" since Monday.

"That's absurd," Goss said, "especially since it's such a preventable form of pollution."

And that potential contamination, which occurs when the pathogen-loaded pet waste gets washed into waterways that humans swim and play in, can add up quickly considering the local dog population.

Butler said there are roughly 34,000 registered dogs in New Hanover County, and together they produce more than 12 1/2 tons of pet waste a day.

So city officials are trying a new tack to get pet owners to think a bit more before walking away from their dog's leftovers.



Photo by Paul Stephen

Doris Canton (left), her daughter Sue Ingram and Ingram's dog Amy stroll through Halyburton Park on Thursday, past a pair of signs indicating a spot where animal waste was found. The flagging is part of a new program encouraging pet owners to clean up after their animals.

The social marketing campaign is using both the carrot and the stick to try and get a targeted audience, in this case pet owners, to voluntarily change their behavior for a community benefit.

Butler said along with the eye-catching flags, they also are displaying a map of the park in the education center marked with all of the uncollected waste. A "Canines for Clean Water" pledge by pet owners also gets their best friend a doggie bandanna, treats and a chance to have their pooch's picture featured on the department's Web page.

And if that doesn't work?

Well, City Council recently passed a big stick in the form of a \$250 fine for pet owners who leave their dog's waste dropped in a public spot, which includes sidewalks.

The new ordinance goes into effect Nov. 1 – another reason for the educational push this month.

Butler said parks are a natural spot to start the pilot program because that's where pet owners congregate. It also offers good visibility for marketing the new campaign, which hopes to see a week-to-week decrease in uncollected pet waste.

Andy Fairbanks, director of Halyburton, said pet waste isn't a huge problem, although it seems to be increasing as the park gets more popular.

"But there's nothing worse then when you're out with a school group leading an educational talk and someone steps in it," he said.

Goss, after flagging a poop pile just two yards from a pet waste station, admitted that he didn't notice the duty of fecal finder under the job description when he applied for the internship.

But he said he didn't mind the feces flagging work if it helps – and possibly shames – people into being more responsible when out with their pets.

Sue Ingram, for one, likes the extra attention the neon flags bring down on all dog owners.

"I think it's a great idea," she said as she held a small bag containing the poop of her dog Amy, who waited patiently for her walk to continue, "because leaving your pet's waste on the ground is just disgusting."

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