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Be a good neighbor

by John Keith
MySouthEnd.com Contributor
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A couple months ago, I looked out my apartment window and saw a trail of cars backed up all the way down Tremont Street, all the way into Chinatown it seemed. Horns blared, tires squealed, cars idled and tempers flared - including my own.

See, this was certainly not the first time this has happened. And the culprit? The restaurant across the street, where overworked valets try in vain to keep up with parking the cars of hungry patrons, resulting in, however inadvertently, a nightmare traffic jam.

And I had had enough.

I ran down the five flights of stairs and stormed across the street, past the valets and into the restaurant. "You have to move those cars!" I shouted at the maitre d'.

One of the chefs/owners came out. "What's the problem?" he asked - a bit scared, I think.

"You have to move those cars! You're blocking traffic all the way down the street!" I yelled.

He would not hear of it. "What do you want us to do, not allow people to come in here? You want us to close down, to close the restaurant down?"

"No!" I shouted. "I want you to be a better neighbor!"

A better neighbor. Is that too much to ask?

I've been thinking about it a lot lately. The media seems to love our neighborhood and we always get good press - the restaurants, the galleries, the new shops. But, if you head over to the Internet and read some blogs, you'll see that not everyone loves the South End. Now, it's true that some of these people are real nut-jobs, who spend their days whining about how bad things are. But for me, at least one of their criticisms seems to ring true: Many of my neighbors are taking a pass on the whole "community" thing. And everywhere I look, I see it.

For example, last month, I attended the monthly South End Landmarks Commission meeting. In attendance were myself, the commissioner, four committee members. And that was it - not a single other resident of the South End turned out to hear what developments were being proposed for their neighborhood.

Two months earlier, however, a developer had come in with plans to renovate the Concord Baptist Church on Warren Avenue, turning the building into condos. At that meeting, around 30 residents showed up. "Mr. Commissioner," one intoned indignantly, "I have lived in the South End for over 20 years, and we cannot allow this to happen!"

She and others who spoke described themselves as active members of the community. Several made mention that they were

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Upcoming Events

Quick Poll

Boston -- and the South End -- has been the site of several movie shoots lately. How do you feel about the new Bossywood?

- It's great -- I love celebrities!
- It's great -- I love the benefits for Boston and the neighborhood!
- We're all going to be famous!
- I just hope they put things back the way they found them
- It's an inconvenience
- I could care less

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members of the South End Historical Society. But where were these "concerned residents" and "active members of the community" the month before the church renovation was on the agenda? Where were they the month after?

Nowhere to be found.

Turns out, many of those who showed up at the Baptist Church meeting were abutters to the church - they weren't at the meeting as "active members of the community" but as people who didn't want a new development in their backyard. They were more worried that condo owners in the converted church would have windows looking into their apartments than they were with the quality of any restoration.

No doubt, this spring will bring the annual "we need to sweep our streets better" and "trash is getting out of control" complaints. But really, we know who is at fault, don't we? It's not your neighbor who isn't carrying his or her weight. And it isn't your neighbor who isn't doing his or her "civic duty."

It's you.

You're the one who forgets to move your car on street-sweeping day.

You're the one who piles empty cardboard boxes into recycling bins on top of empty wine bottles that then fall out into the street, minutes after you head back inside.

You're the one who leaves little blue bags of presents from your dog all around the neighborhood.

Not your neighbor.

What have you done lately to make your neighborhood better? Have you attended your local neighborhood association meeting? Do you go to Landmarks meetings? Do you shop in your neighborhood? Do you vote? Contrary to what Woody Allen once said - "Nine-tenths of life is just showing up" - being a "good" neighbor requires a lot more than attendance.

Those residents who spend time at the Hurley School are good neighbors. Getting involved in your child's education is what it means to be a good parent. And the residents who put time and money into rebuilding Peter's Park are good neighbors. While the dollar amount spent (\$250,000? \$350,000?) seems a bit garish to some, you cannot deny that they did it right - the entire park is a beauty to behold, and much more functional for a lot more people. Bravo.

Our friends at the Union Park Neighborhood Association who stuffed the ballot box in a coup d'état are not good neighbors. They want the Pine Street Inn to find another location than Upton Street for housing of previously homeless men and women. How vulgar. "Good" neighbors learn to adapt, learn to bring people together. Living in an urban environment requires a higher level of patience, acceptance and even sophistication. Excluding people from living in your neighborhood is unseemly, arrogant, and just about every other word that means "bad."

Bad neighbors also do things like this: This morning, I left my home and headed outside. Three plastic bags full of garbage were at the curb. Thing is, trash day was yesterday. I know the owner of the trash realized he or she missed the trash pick-up, because

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the trash had been moved from his or her front door back to the curb, overnight.

The trash will now sit there until Friday, the next pick-up day. Or it won't. Most likely by then, the bags will have been broken open and the contents strewn up and down the street. What would it have taken for that owner to bring the trash back inside the doorway of the building?

I don't know, but I intend to find out.

Neighbor, your trash includes bills with your name, address, and phone number on them.

Expect my call.

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