

Lakewood volunteers honored They've seen the signs

ROB TUCKER; The News Tribune

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Sandy and Jean Mazzei live in Lakewood and love its big evergreen trees and large lakes.

But the retired educators dislike the illegal signs – mostly garage or yard sale notices – they see nailed to utility poles and hung on street signs.

So they joined a group of volunteers to help enforce the city sign code.

While others stopped over the years, the Mazzeis kept at it and have taken down more than 10,000 illegal signs in the past decade.

“We’re hoping to make Lakewood a better place,” Sandy Mazzei said last week.

Doug Price, city code enforcement officer, said the couple has done Lakewood more than a small favor. Some illegal signs block the vision of drivers and pedestrians, he said, and the signs sometimes advertise illegal or predatory businesses.

People stood and applauded the Mazzeis last week after the City Council honored them with the Bill Harrison Volunteer of the Year Award. Harrison was the city’s first mayor and presented the award himself.

Sandy Mazzei is 81 and Jean is 74 years old. They moved to Lakewood in 1980 and later got involved in the movement that led to formation of a city in 1996.

“When we first started thinking about Lakewood as our city,” Sandy Mazzei said, “one thing riled me – the many signs.”

The fledgling city had a small staff. It needed volunteers to help with things like litter cleanup and taking down signs.

The Mazzeis volunteered, and the city supplied them with orange vests and identification cards signed by the city manager.

Often, after playing tennis, they take separate cars to scour city streets so they can cover more area.

Over a decade, they have removed more than 1,000 illegal signs a year.

Mainly, they volunteer, Jean Mazzei said, because the illegal signs make some areas look “crummy” in a city located in such a scenic setting.

“We wanted to help Lakewood and keep the beauty of it,” she said.

They are not only willing, they have time to volunteer. In 1982, Sandy retired after 30 years with the Tacoma School District, including vice principal jobs at Stadium High School and Jason Lee Middle School.

Jean Mazzei retired the same year after teaching history in the Franklin Pierce School District for 26 years.

The Mazzeis are well versed in which signs are illegal, said Dave Bugher, city community development director.

They know that some temporary signs are permitted. They don’t remove political signs. If they have questions, they call Price, the



DREW PERINE/THE NEWS TRIBUNE
Sandy Mazzei, 81, and his wife, Jean, 74, have helped remove illegal signs from Lakewood’s streets for more than a decade. The retired educators were honored Monday with the city’s Bill Harrison Volunteer of the Year Award. Harrison, Lakewood’s first mayor, presented the honor himself.

code enforcement officer.

Lakewood residents can get information on how to legally post signs from City Hall.

In the past seven years, the Mazzeis have taken down 7,940 illegal signs. They didn't count the ones they removed in the first four years.

It is a job that never seems to end. Illegal signs sometime reappear the day after they're taken down.

The couple works more than 150 hours a year. During the winter, they see fewer problems, but with spring and summer come garage and yard sales, so they get busy.

Sandy Mazzei said they've taken down 152 illegal signs already this year.

"We're not letting up at all," he said.

They patrol at least three days a week during warmer weather. They keep their orange vests in the car so that if they're driving somewhere and see an illegal sign, they can put on their official garb and take it down.

Price said in a letter to city officials that the Mazzeis worked tirelessly and without official thanks for years after they were mistakenly dropped from the city volunteer list.

They kept on working but were left out of many recognition events.

On Monday, however, they were the stars.

"We're self-starters," Sandy Mazzei said.

"We don't need supervision. It's not glamorous, it's rather mundane, but we see the results."