



BUSINESS

Pierce County road crew workers yank signs, real estate agents steamed

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Real estate agents, already feeling the brunt of a slowing market, are now facing the brunt of a Pierce County sign law.

Last month, county road crews began removing and throwing away signs found to be illegally installed on the county rights of way. Among many of them: ones used to market homes for sale and open houses. The sign roundup is part of a countywide effort to enforce longtime sign laws. It was tested last summer with a two-month pilot program intended to rid roadways of clutter.

Since Feb. 15, county workers have collected and taken to the dump 1,320 signs, said Bruce Wagner, the county's road operations division manger. Nearly half were real-estate related, he said Tuesday.

Agents who've lost signs are lamenting the cost of replacement, inconsistently applied rules and the harm the removals are causing their business.

"The county's never been this aggressive in doing it," said Jo Jensen, an owner of the Re/Max Partners office in Gig Harbor. "It's impacting our business, it's damaging, it's very costly. It's not just the agents that are upset, it's the sellers. In a market where there's lots of inventory, signs are one of the things that make their phones ring."

County staff and real estate agents were scheduled to meet Wednesday to discuss the sign removal efforts.

A typical yard sign, Jensen said, costs about \$25 plus another \$50 for the wood post. Ordering replacements can take two to three weeks, she said.

During the pilot program, Wagner said county workers stored the signs so they could be retrieved. But, he said, it became difficult and time-consuming to determine who owned which signs, and so now they go to the landfill, he said.

Recycling those made with recyclable materials would cost \$56 per ton and is an option, he said.

A right of way is a legal boundary that can truly be determined only by a property survey, Wagner said. When workers are in the field, they rely on utility poles and boxes as a rule of thumb, because they're typically on the edge of the right of way, Wagner said.

"If it's questionable, my staff has been told to leave it," he said. "Anything clearly inside it is taken."

Windermere real estate agent John Gregory said he's had 14 sandwich board signs taken and a larger sign sawed off its post in the last three weeks. Gregory is selling homes at Linden Tree, a small subdivision in Spanaway, and said he tries to keep signs out of the right of way by making sure they don't block drivers' sight lines.

But Gregory said he's particularly frustrated, because there's no sure way of telling where the right of way starts and ends.

"It's hard to determine where they mean in every situation," he said.

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