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Tall grass a growing problem

By KATIE ANDERSON - kanderson@nwherald.com
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[PHOTO] Village of Algonquin helps upkeep yards
Cary Fellows works as a plumping inspector for the village of Algonquin Community Development Department. To help save money Fellows and his boss started to help upkeep yards of foreclosed houses in their free time on the job.

ALGONQUIN – On a sunny summer afternoon, Tunbridge Trail looks like a set from the movie “The Stepford Wives” – almost too perfect.

The homes made with handsome stone and brick have three-car garages with even blacktop driveways and lawns so perfectly emerald green that they almost sparkle if the sunlight catches the neatly trimmed blades just right.

All spring, however, the picturesque view has been interrupted by the home at 1325.

“It’s just an eyesore,” Wendy McMahan said. The Algonquin woman has lived at 1320 Tunbridge, directly across the street from 1325, for about eight years. She stood outside her home on a recent weekday and paused from some garden work to vent.

“At one point, the weeds were so high they were almost as tall as me,” McMahan said, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow and shaking her head in exasperation.

The trouble with 1325 is that no one mows or landscapes the property. The house was foreclosed last year. The family moved out in February. And since then, with no one to cut it back, the lawn has grown unruly.

On a recent Tuesday, the grass was knee-high and had gone to seed.

The bushes were wild and amorphous, reaching out into the yard, and a patch of buttery-yellow day lilies near the front door was almost completely hidden by thistles.

The scene on Tunbridge is not unique to the neighborhood or the village. With more than 8,500 properties foreclosed on since 2008 and stalled housing developments scattered from Huntley to Hebron, McHenry County has been dealing with tall grass problems at hundreds of properties the past several summers.

"My estimate would be that approximately 25 to 30 properties required maintenance in 2010 by the village, and we seem to be on track for about the same this year," said Diane LaCalamita, a building inspector for the village of Algonquin.

"We currently have over 150 ongoing cases associated with grass and weed violations," said Rick Paulson, building commissioner for the city of Crystal Lake. The number of complaints and inspections associated with grass complaints, however, is significantly higher, he added.

Most municipalities in the county have ordinances that seek to control grass height.

In Lake in the Hills, Cary, Marengo, McHenry and Woodstock, the limit is 8 inches. In Fox River Grove and on vacant lots in Spring Grove, village code allows 12 inches before violation.

The limits are set for aesthetic purposes, local officials said. Neighborhoods and business districts want to maintain a positive image, and tall grass works against that.

"If you're a neighbor, you want the grass to be mowed," said Derik Morefield, deputy city manager for Woodstock.

His city fields most complaints from lots owned by subdivision developers who seem to have forgotten about their vacant lots scattered amid new homes. An example, he said, is in the Apple Creek development on Dean Street south of Route 14, where about 1,000 homes were approved, but fewer than half have been built.

In most towns, community development or building departments handle complaints about tall grass. When a violation is noticed, the municipality sends a letter to the last known owner of the property. Generally, that party is given seven to 10 days to respond and get the grass mowed.

The next action varies depending on the municipality.

"The approach that we take is a softer approach," Woodstock's Morefield said. "We send letters, give time to comply, and if we don't hear back, generally we try again to contact them.

"Ultimately, we can cite them for not having the grass mowed, and we can take them to municipal adjudication court, but that is the last resort," he said. "We just want to see compliance. That is our No. 1 goal."

In Hebron, where the height limit is 5 inches, the village is less generous.

"We give 10 days to contact us and another 10 days to correct the problem," said Randall Funk, code enforcement, building inspector and public works superintendent.

"If that doesn't work, we mow and put a lien against the property," he said.

Who mows in each municipality varies, too. Some pay a landscaping service; others use village employees. In Algonquin, for example, the task has fallen to village plumbing inspector Cary Fellows.

"I started last year," Fellows said recently. He spoke from the cage of a Dixie Chopper borrowed from public works and parked in the backyard of 1325 Tunbridge Trail. Piles of cut grass, drying in the sun like hay, lay around his mower.

"We used to pay a landscaper but thought, 'why not do it ourselves and cut out the middle man,'" he said. For the job tackling the turf at Tunbridge, the village will bill the bank who owns the property about \$100, he said.

McMahan was relieved that the view from her front yard had improved. And she is happy the village has rules about how high grass can grow, but she is aggravated at the time and effort it takes to get relief when there is a violation.

McMahan said that she had called the village to report her neighbor's lawn repeatedly during the spring and summer.

"The problem is, we have to wait until the growth is 8 inches tall before it is a violation," she said. "Then we have to wait for an inspection, letters and notice, and another inspection to make sure [the owners] didn't come mow."

Because the system treats each outgrowth as a separate violation, 1325 Tunbridge is caught in a cycle of overgrowth, complaint, wait and, finally, mow.

"What can we do but wait or mow it ourselves?" McMahan said. "And we shouldn't have to.

"It's just a sign of the times I guess," she added. "And it's unfortunate."

Here is a sampling of some local grass height limits taken from village documents:

- McHenry County - No limit
- Lake in the Hills - 8 inches
- Algonquin - 8 inches
- Cary - 8 inches
- Fox River Grove - 12 inches
- Hebron - 5 inches
- Marengo - 8 inches
- McHenry - 8 inches
- Crystal Lake - 8 inches
- Huntley - 8 inches
- Spring Grove - 8 inches for homes, 12 inches for vacant lots

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