

Talking trash in B'more

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In case anyone hasn't been around Baltimore's waterfront lately, the Inner Harbor is frequently awash in floating and submerged trash. That should be no surprise even to landlubbers, given the litter readily seen in alleys and vacant lots, in street gutters and in the storm drains that ultimately empty into the city's watery heart.

A City Council committee held an "informational hearing" Tuesday on how to reduce the torrents of refuse and debris that flow into the harbor every time it rains. It quickly broadened into a spirited discussion of illegal trash dumping, uneven enforcement by the city, and a lack of engagement by municipal officials with residents who feel besieged by the blight.

Councilman James B. Kraft, chairman of the judicial and legislative investigations committee, professed himself "very very frustrated" with the lack of progress on the issue despite numerous meetings since a council resolution calling for an inquiry into the harbor's trash problem was introduced in December 2008. "It feels like we are in some cases going backwards, not forwards," chimed in Councilman William H. Cole IV, chief sponsor of the resolution. "We're not where we need to be," acknowledged Marcia Collins of the city's Department of Public Works.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officially designated Baltimore's harbor "impaired" by trash nearly two years ago, pointed out Phil Lee of the Baltimore Harbor Watershed Association. Though not traditionally considered a pollutant, the floating debris makes the water uninviting to look at, much less swim in. It's also a carrier of some of the bacteria and other pollutants making the water unsafe for human contact. As a result, the city will face increasing legal pressure from state and federal government to clean the harbor up.

Where does all the floating waste come from? According to a report given to the council Tuesday, more than 300,000 pounds of trash and debris were collected in just eight months in 2008 from the Jones Falls where it flows into the harbor. A little more than half of it was "natural" -- leaves, tree and bush branches and other plant material. The rest was decidedly man-made - an estimated 189,000 plastic bottles, 160,000 foam cups and 58,000 grocery bags, among other things.

(That last raises a question about whether plastic carryout bags are one of the harbor's primary litter problems. Kraft's council committee has been mulling various legislative efforts to reduce litter by discouraging stores from giving away disposable paper and plastic bags for holding their merchandise whenever shoppers make a purchase.

But the most frequently seen litter in the Jones Falls, it seems, are cigarette butts. More than 1 million were plucked from mounds of trash collected at the stream's mouth.

Maybe the council should look closer at smoking in public? Maybe require outdoor ashtrays at bars, office buildings and other places where smokers congregate outdoors these days to get their nicotine fix, since indoor smoking is largely banned?)

Trash booms and collectors have been posted at a few of the larger storm-water outfalls that flush into the harbor. There are plans afoot to deploy more trash nets and booms, a multi-million-dollar capital expenditure the city can ill afford in its current anemic fiscal condition.

But some of the residents who came downtown for Tuesday's hearing suggested the litter cleanup needs to start in neighborhoods far from the waterfront. City officials need to work more cooperatively with residents, they said, rather than merely fine them whenever they put their trash or recyclables out in the wrong container, wrong day or wrong place.

Representatives of the Baltimore Harbor Watershed Association displayed maps showing red dots sprinkled throughout the neighborhoods inland from harborfront Canton where residents say there's illegal dumping and storm drains jammed with trash. They showed photos of trash bags and debris piled in vacant lots, which they say have gone uncollected for a week or more after residents call to report them.

"We need to change things - boldly, radically change things," said Dr. Ray Bahr, a retired cardiologist and Canton resident. Residents who feel ignored and abused have given up on calling the city's 311 hotline to report problems, he said.

"The Inner Harbor is not going to be clean if we do not get the city clean," warned Russell Stewart, of East Baltimore, who echoed Bahr's comment about city unresponsiveness to residents calling in complaints about illegal dumping. "If you do not win the community over, you can forget it," he added. "You'll be wasting your time and money."

There was debate about whether the bulk of the litter is home-grown or imported. Some suggested irresponsible contractors, commuters and landlords were to blame for much of the debris dumped in streets, alleys and vacant lots. Drug dealers also, apparently. But others pointed to renters for a lot of the trash. Even well-intentioned residents got fingered, for sweeping refuse from their walks into gutters and storm drains.

"Somewhere along the line, we've got to stop this Catch 22 and do something," said Bahr.

Kraft said he and other council members would consult with a selection of residents and other stakeholders to draw up new regulations or legislation to tackle the problem. The committee plans another, final hearing on harbor trash July 6.