



Through the county's new instant ticket program, Raymond Alexander, 45, of New Castle has been fined for having inoperable cars on his commercial lot. The system was designed to bring quicker relief to residents who want neighbors to clean up.

#### CLEANING UP FAST

Instead of a protracted process that drags offending property owners through the court system, New Castle County now issues an "instant ticket" warning letter. The property owner has 10 days to fix the problem or face an automatic \$50 fine.

#### WHAT'LL GET YOU A TICKET

##### TOP 10 VIOLATIONS

- High grass and weeds
- Accessory structures (sheds, fences, etc.) in poor condition
- Inoperable and/or unregistered vehicles
- Parking on grass
- Oversized vehicles
- Outside storage of household items
- Not having trash in proper waste container
- Accumulation of rubbish, garbage or debris
- Unsanitary swimming pools, or empty pools not covered
- Overgrown shrubs or trees that extend beyond sidewalk or right of way

#### LIKE THE IDEA?

To report a property code violation, call the Department of Land Use at 395-5555.

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### ***For residents in NCCo, it's clip it or ticket***

System speeds up the fining process for code violators, but not all residents think it's fair

By *ANGIE BASIOUNY*  
*The News Journal*

New Castle County officials can understand why Raymond Alexander is upset with a new program that gives "instant tickets" to property owners with common code violations such as neglecting overgrown grass or piles of debris.

Last month, Alexander received one of those tickets -- a \$50 fine for having inoperable cars on a commercial lot he owns off Del. 9. He said he plans on fixing up the cars, but hasn't gotten around to it.

Alexander said he doesn't think it's fair he has to pay the government because of what's on his private property.

"Honestly, I think it's insane," he said. "I don't mind you telling me that I have to have my grass cut, but if I wanted to make a political statement and put a toilet in my front yard and a sign that says, 'Down with the county,' would you fine me for doing it?"

A quirky political statement isn't what catches the eye of code enforcement officers, said Mark Veasey, a spokesman for the county's Department of Land Use.

But folks who don't keep their properties in tip-top shape can expect to get fined.

"We're not trying to stop people from restoring classic cars, for example," Veasey said. "But if they are going to do that, they should keep the cars in a garage out from public view. That's what the code says."

Modeled after Wilmington's year-old instant ticketing program, the county's program was designed to bring faster relief for complaining residents who want their sloppy neighbors to clean up.

Instead of a protracted process that drags offending property owners through the court system, the county now issues an "instant ticket" warning letter. The property owner has 10 days to fix the problem or face an automatic \$50 fine.

The new policy seems to be working.

In the first seven weeks of the program, 610 properties were cited and 1,634 tickets issued. That's an average of 2.7 violations per property.

The county has assessed \$81,700 in fines for the seven weeks, compared with \$74,425 for all of last year using the court process.

"There are a number of reasons why this was started in the first place," Veasey said. "We implemented it as a way to speed up the process because folks were complaining that it was taking too long to get anything done."

The program's success also can be measured by the number of property owners who complied with the warning letters and cleaned up their messes before they were fined, officials say.

There were 857 of those, Veasey said.

"That's a 53 percent improvement or reduction over 2007," Veasey said. "So 10 days later when we go out, we don't see a problem and we close the case. That was the other hope -- that it would result in fewer follow-up inspections. And it has."

## **Targeting poor, elderly?**

But Alexander and others think the system is flawed because it unfairly penalizes the elderly and poor who may not have the means to fix up their properties.

"Wealthy people don't have to worry about this stuff," said Alexander, a Holloway Terrace resident and bar owner. "They can simply wave their magic wand and have it done for them. The poor, maybe they just can't get to it. Maybe they're on a fixed income and they've been hit with a 50 percent increase on their electric bill and gas prices. This just picks on the little guy."

Robert Davis, one of Alexander's neighbors in Holloway Terrace, agrees.

He has a Sept. 23 court date to deal with violations he received before the instant ticketing program began.

Davis, who is older, said he can't always keep up with the repairs. He hates the idea that he could rack up even more "instant" fines.

"I don't like the program, period," he said. "I'm 72 years old and I'm getting fed up with it. They get onto you, and they don't get off of you. I'm working on the house."

Veasey is not without sympathy.

He said the county isn't trying to punish anyone, but it wants people to take responsibility for the condition of their properties. Trash, junk cars and out-of-control shrubs all contribute to lower property values and a lower quality of life for residents, he said.

"Nobody likes getting a violation notice, and we understand that," he said. "If somebody receives one, then the obvious thing to do is to correct the violation. Anybody needing more time should contact us and explain the situation, and we'll try to work with them."

Unlike the city, which has roving code-enforcement officers who give on-the-spot tickets, the county's system relies on residents to make complaints.

"They are causing people to rat on their neighbors," Alexander said. "What's going on here?"

Under the county's program, anyone who wants to appeal an instant ticket would still have to send in the payment along with a detailed, written explanation for the appeal. A code-enforcement official would then review the explanation and make a decision. If the appeal is successful, the resident would be reimbursed.

Alexander and Davis say there is no logic in a system that forces someone to pay first, then seek vindication.

"Once they get your money," Davis said, "you ain't getting it back."

Veasey said the program is working because it is helping to free code enforcement officers from a mountain of paperwork, giving them time to go after more serious scofflaws.