

# Getting the system to work

I got a call from a city official shortly after we mailed the last *CityWatch*, which featured a picture of a broken brick sidewalk on North Lexington Avenue. He wanted me to know that that sidewalk would soon be repaired, and sure enough within the week it was fixed (although with a slab of concrete rather than with the original brickwork). This official thanked me for pointing out the problem, but suggested that next time, instead of publishing a photo of something that needs fixing, I should just call him. If it were a real problem affecting the safety of Asheville's citizens, then he would see that it was taken care of. I said

sure, I can do that. But something felt wrong. What if I missed something? Did every citizen have the same clout that I did to get something repaired quickly?

I then got to thinking about an earlier experience with this same man two years earlier—before *CityWatch*—when I sent him a comprehensive list of pedestrian safety problems. I got no help at all. Now that I have a magazine, though, all of a sudden things are happening. What's the message here? Is it that the ordinary citizen will get less attention than one who can publish? Why, of course. Let's just keep these matters of public concern

private, we'll fix them, and nobody needs to know.

But that's no good. I started *CityWatch* to try to get city government to be respon-

sive. Therefore, my job is not to work with city officials; my job is to gently push government to do its job. By exposing problems I'm hoping that eventually the city will take responsibility for finding, reporting and fixing what's broken. Nearly everyone I've talked to has said that they wouldn't bother calling the city to fix a problem, because that would be a waste of time.

In my opinion, what we need is not a cadre of citizen complainers, but a system of government that encourages and rewards its own workers to look for and report problems. Every day there are many city employees out on the streets. Some are fixing potholes, others are replacing a street sign, police officers are on patrol, water department workers are digging up the street. All of these city workers could be encouraged to look around and spot other problems, and report them. A system of rewards could be put in place. Surely, at some point over the last several months, at least one city employee walked over or drove by the aforementioned broken sidewalk. It would be reassuring to know that the pothole our car just fell into had been reported by the police who ride over most streets—at least the major ones—every day. All it would take is a quick call on the police radio to report potholes, traffic lights burned out, and other hazards around town. Same process could be used with Public Works employees.

## To encourage citizen response

For those citizens who do bother to call about a problem, the city needs a public response system that is truly responsive to the public. Instead of the people at the public response office seeming less than happy to handle complaints, what if that office worked something like this:

**PUBLIC RESPONSE:** Hello, city of Asheville.



Shortly after the last issue of *CityWatch* hit the streets with the top photo of Alan Wilcox stymied at a vehicle-blocked wheelchair ramp, the Public Works Department corrected the situation by prohibiting parking in front of the ramp. *CityWatch* takes credit for this. I, as a private citizen, had written to Public Works about this problem but had gotten no response.





The city said it would clear these parking stop blocks from this sidewalk on Cherry Street—two years ago. Patience is a virtue when dealing with the City.

**CITIZEN:** Hi, I'd like to report a sidewalk with parking stop blocks obstructing pedestrians."

**PR:** OK, where is that?

**C:** On Cherry Street beside the city parking lot.

**PR:** Thank you for calling.

We'll have someone from Public Works over there as soon as possible to take care of that. Could I have your phone number so I can call you when the problem is fixed.

**C:** Yes my number is \_\_\_\_\_.

**PR:** Good. Thanks for helping us do our job. I would also like to send you our public response reply

form. Could I have your address?

**C:** Yes, it's \_\_\_\_\_.

**PR:** Please call again if you see a problem that the city should correct. The city of Asheville appreciates your good citizenship. Good-bye.

**C:** Good-bye and thanks for helping.

By going the extra mile in terms of courtesy, the city will actually encourage citizens to report problems.

#### **Abby endorses drug legalization**

The city of Asheville has a budget crunch. There is a hiring

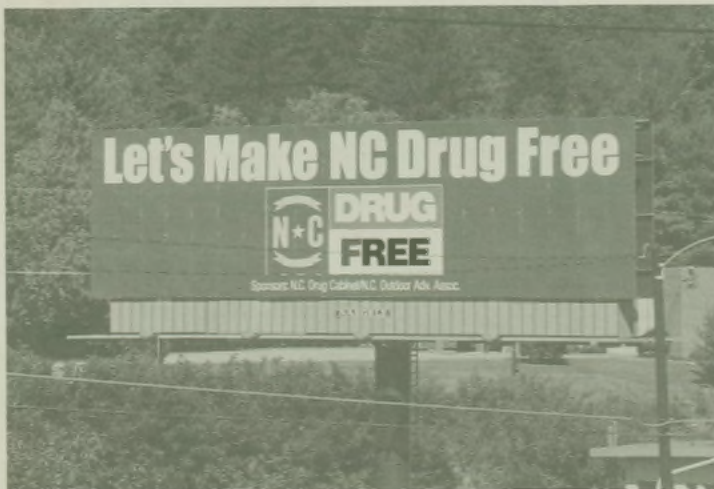
freeze which will adversely affect some departments. Yet the police department wants more officers to fight crime, and it will likely get some of what it wants. Councilman Chris Peterson advocates increased patrols in high crime areas where drugs are sold. Yet much of this extra expense could be obviated by decriminalizing the use of street drugs, such as marijuana and cocaine. Much of the crime in Asheville and virtually every city in America has risen dramatically in direct proportion to the police crackdown on illegal drug use.

"Just as bootleggers were forced out of business in 1933 when Prohibition was repealed, making the sale of liquor legal (thus eliminating racketeering), the legalization of drugs would put drug dealers out of business," says Abby in a recent *Dear Abby* column. She adds that "it would also guarantee government-approved quality, and the tax on drugs would provide an ongoing source of revenue for drug-education programs. An added plus: there would be far less crowding in our prisons due to drug-related crimes."

Alcohol use is legal. Annual estimated deaths from alcohol use, including drunk driving, are 105,000. Legal tobacco use causes 434,000 deaths a year. Illegal cocaine and crack cause an estimated 3300 deaths a year, heroin and morphine, 2400. And the most widely used illegal drug, marijuana, has caused no known death, according to some experts. Remember that legalization does not mean society condones the use of drugs or any other item available in the free market. It simply means that prohibition doesn't work, cannot work and never will work.

"The Dutch take a balanced approach to drug abuse that emphasizes treatment and minimizes risk to both the community and the drug users," says Kurt L. Schmoke, Mayor of Baltimore, in the foreword to *Drug Policy and the Decline of American Cities*, by Sam Staley (Transaction Publishers, 1992). Schmoke has taken a bold leadership role in this controversial arena of drug legalization—or decriminalization. He has seen his city's criminal





The ILLEGAL drugs that the North Carolina Drug Council wants us to be free of kill 5700 people a year nationwide, while LEGAL tobacco and alcohol kill 539,000 people a year.

justice system being crushed under the weight of the war on drugs. He cites the Dutch program as evidence that drug use doesn't mushroom out of control with legalization. The Dutch, according to Schmoke, "discovered what many of our national leaders choose to ignore: drug prohibition leads to huge profits and the creation of criminal enterprises determined to maintain these profits. The result...is chaos and tragedy in our urban communities." Schmoke, an African-American himself, goes on to say, "There are now more African-American men under the control of the criminal justice system than there are in college. There is something profoundly wrong with a policy that leads to such an unjust outcome. The fact of the matter is, those with the least hope, the least education, and the least chance of achieving economic opportunity are bearing most of the burden of drug addiction, incarceration, and drug-related crime. That might change, however, with a national drug policy that emphasizes public health."

"The result of our drug-protectionist policy is that we now find it impossible to re-legalize drugs [all drugs were legal until 1914]—we lack both the popular will for it and the requisite legal-political infrastructure to support

it," says Thomas Szasz in *Our Right to Drugs* (Praeger Publishers, 1992). Szasz says that instead of protecting blacks and Hispanics from dangerous drugs, the war on drugs has allowed us to persecute them, in the guise of therapists—working selflessly to bring about a drug-free America. "I support a free market in drugs not because I think it is—at this moment in the United States—a practical policy, but because I believe it is right and because I believe that—in the long run—the

right policy may also be the practical policy."

What is the most addictive drug yet discovered? According to Daniel K. Benjamin and Roger Leroy Miller, in their book *Undoing Drugs: Beyond Legalization* (Basic Books, 1991), "The most addictive drug known is nicotine. Studies show that 80 percent of people who try smoking cigarettes for any length of time become addicted. This number, surprisingly, is much lower for crack cocaine." The authors propose an alternative that is neither nationwide legalization nor an intensified national war on drugs. They propose taking the power over this problem out of Washington and giving it to the states and local communities. "The average American is caught in a crossfire. The combatants are drug dealers who prowl our neighborhoods, drug addicts who steal to support their habits, and drug-enforcement agents waging warfare upon dealers, addicts, and innocent citizens alike. We, the people of America, have let the dealers and addicts and drug agents take control, and only we—not the bureaucrats and politicians in Washington—can retake America."

These three books offer three different solutions to the drug problem in America. They are all worth reading.



If drugs were legalized police resources could be freed up to do other police work.