

Influential legislation makes dent in scrap metal thefts

Columbus' efforts to reduce scrap metal theft and catch those responsible have been fruitful thanks to an online system.

In July 2007, Columbus City Council passed legislation to address scrap metal theft that involved a number of provisions to track those selling metal to scrap yards.

Council now stands poised to pass an amendment to its 2007 legislation to bring it in line with state law. Councilman Andrew Ginther, chairman of the public safety committee, convened a public hearing Thursday, May 14, to discuss the legislation and hear public opinion.

'Throughout our city ... metal items such as manhole covers, guard rails, air conditioners and virtually every other metal item you could think of was being stolen due to the dramatic increase in the price of metal,' said George Speaks, deputy director of the department of public safety. Through collaboration with the division of police, the department of public safety and members of the scrap metal industry, Council was able to create a law to discourage scrap metal theft.

The law was the first of its type in Ohio, on which other cities based their own laws. It requires a number of steps:

- * Sellers of scrap are required to offer photo identification along with their name, address, license plate number and thumbprint;
- * Sellers must provide proof of ownership for items such as shopping carts, manhole covers, grave makers and guard rails;
- * Uniform scrap item descriptions must be recorded by scrap dealer; and
- * Dealers are required to record and keep aforementioned information and report it daily to the division of police.

Jeff McNealy, an attorney representing the Ohio Chapter of the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, said the institute resolved to work with the city despite qualms. 'Any industry does not like any regulatory system,' he said.

When the system was first enacted, all documents were given to police in paper form. Detective Jack Addington said between April 27 and May 2, 5,000 reports from 15 scrap yards were delivered to the division of police, equating to 25 pounds of paper per week.

Ashley Sacridier, a manager with **LeadsOnline**, demonstrated the online system where all that information is now recorded. When a scrap metal theft is reported, police easily can search the online system to find if that item has been sold to a dealer. Police are able to search by such criteria as type of metal, make of vehicle and name.

'Columbus is basically able to find a needle in the haystack with this site,' Sacridier said.

Addington related several cases in which the **LeadsOnline** system resulted in the arrest of a suspect. 'Before we had these online, if I chose to spend my day searching through these, that would be my whole day,' Addington said.

Ohio enacted its own legislature in fall 2008 based primarily on Columbus' law, Speaks said. The state law, however, has minor adjustments that are reflected in the proposed amendment:

- * The incorporation of Ohio Revised Code metal descriptions;
- * Scrap dealers no longer need to supply police with a hard copy of information; and
- * The thumbprint does not need to be uploaded to **LeadsOnline**, but a hard copy is kept by the dealer.

McNealy said having a uniform law throughout the state will prevent thieves from migrating out of the city to sell scrap.

Steve Gladman, president of the local Affordable Housing Trust and Grandview city councilman, was the only member of the public to speak on the matter at last week's hearing. Gladman said when the organization rehabilitates homes, the sites often are broken into, resulting in not only theft but damage as well.

'In the last year and a half, we've seen a substantial decline in that,' he said. 'I think ... (the regulations) made a substantial difference.' Information not available.

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