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A health code blitz in Downtown Crossing

Area scoured for pests, sanitation problems

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 16, 2012

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With the holiday shopping season approaching, Boston officials hope to shoo three groups of bargain hunters from Downtown Crossing: rodents, pigeons, and cockroaches.

“We want visitors to walk by and not see nightmares,” John Meaney, the city’s environmental services director, said Thursday after he and other officials found signs of infestations and health and sanitation problems during a crackdown. Their targets included food-court shops, a restaurant, a nightclub, and retail outlets.

The team of inspectors — armed with flashlights, latex gloves, and clipboards — swept through three alleys and toured buildings along a storefront-lined, pedestrian-only section of Winter Street, between Tremont and Washington streets. They issued a dozen violation notices to property owners and their commercial tenants.

Meaney said that while inspectors pay attention to Downtown Crossing throughout the year, they launched the inaugural seasonal blitz because they received complaints and have seen problems there in the past, and because of high traffic from shoppers and tourists.

“I like to call it the first annual Inspectional Services - Department Christmas stroll,” he said.

The most troublesome spot, inspectors said, was an alley between 48 and 50 Winter St. A reporter who accompanied inspectors saw trash barrels, loose garbage, and other debris that created unsanitary conditions and blocked part of the narrow space, which inspectors said could prevent people from safely escaping in an emergency. The lids of several trash barrels behind the building were caked with pigeon droppings, which can carry diseases.

“This is a big concern if the workers are disposing of trash in these receptacles without wearing gloves,” Meaney said.

The barrels are used by employees at the Black Seed Cafe and Grill on Tremont Street, according to the restaurant’s owner, Ibrahim Ibrahim.

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“We wash them every week,” he said. “We do our best.”

Some business owners and employees were initially confused and at times defensive when city workers entered and demanded that the shops turn over pest-control records and unlock doors for inspectors to look inside.

Jody Mendoza, manager of the Mojitos nightclub and lounge, wanted inspectors to assure her that her business was not being singled out.

The club, which has space on multiple floors at 48 Winter St., received violations for cockroach and rodent infestation, an exit without emergency lighting, and other unkempt areas.

“We can only do so much. It’s difficult when you’re one business in the middle” of other businesses, Mendoza said. “But as long as everyone works together, I think we can fix the problems. It’s a good thing that we have the city bringing everyone together.”

Uniting all parties is the key to success, officials said. The crackdown comes as city and state officials are working to combat a rat problem on Castle Island in South Boston.

“If there’s just one piece missing — that’s our biggest battle,” said health inspector Shaun McAuliffe. “If everyone is not on board, problems won’t go away, they’ll just move around.”

The Downtown Boston Business Improvement District partners with city officials to help neighbors collaborate to clean up and maintain shared spaces. The nonprofit and the city recently finished cleaning up two nearby alleys that were among the worst in Boston.

One space, between 45 and 47 Winter St., attracted prostitutes, drug users, and homeless people who used the site as bathroom. But after more than a year’s work, the alley is one of the cleanest outdoor spaces around, and it is secured by a gate that locks.

Meaney calls that alley a success story. Even so, city inspectors issued a violation there Thursday because a large

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DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

John Meaney inspected a Winter Street alley where trash bins could impede escape routes.

metal window shutter was attached to the building in just one corner, hanging ominously overhead.

“These hidden alleys, especially in commercial areas with lots of businesses around them, sometimes people forget about them,” Meaney said.

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