



How the abandoned vehicle process works in Boston

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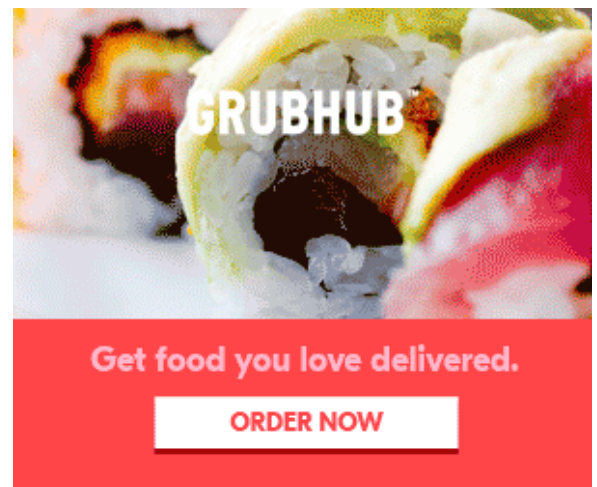
By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF MAY 02, 2017

A vehicle can be reported to city officials as being potentially [abandoned](#) through different ways, including via complaints from residents or police officers.

Such reports prompt workers from the city's transportation department to go to the vehicle's location.

If the vehicle is still there, workers will tag the vehicle with a green sticker to alert its owner that the vehicle must be moved within 72 hours or it's at risk of being towed. (Vehicles that pose a public safety hazard can be towed immediately, and officials will also do other checks on the vehicle, including to see whether it might have been reported stolen.)



If after 72 hours, city officials return and find the car is gone: case closed. Officials said many cars are moved during the 72-hour window after being tagged with a green sticker.

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But if the car has not been moved in more than 72 hours, city officials [can legally tow it away](#) to a municipal lot and may have the vehicle crushed or auctioned off if it does not get claimed.



Spike in abandoned car complaints is a mirage

Boston residents bombard City Hall with an increasing number of reports, but the actual number of abandoned vehicles on city streets has been flat, if not down, in recent years.

This model of car is left abandoned most often in Boston

A look at the cars abandoned at Logan Airport in Boston

“Abandoned vehicles are safety hazards and they blight our neighborhoods. If you abandon your car in Boston, we have the right to fine you, tow your vehicle, and take further action.”

The city could crush a vehicle immediately after it gets towed, though city officials said such cases

are rare. Vehicles usually only get crushed that quickly when they are non-functioning or otherwise in rough shape with zero value, officials said.

Only about 1.6 percent of vehicles that the city deemed to be abandoned were crushed on the same day they were towed, according to a Globe review of data of the 2,100-plus abandoned vehicles that the city removed from city streets between fall 2009 and mid-2015.

Another 1.3 percent were crushed within one to three days after being towed.

City officials said some cases in which the data suggested vehicles were crushed rather quickly may have been vehicles that had already been held for 45 days because they were first impounded for excessive unpaid parking violations.

On average, vehicles were held for about 30 days after they were towed before they were crushed.

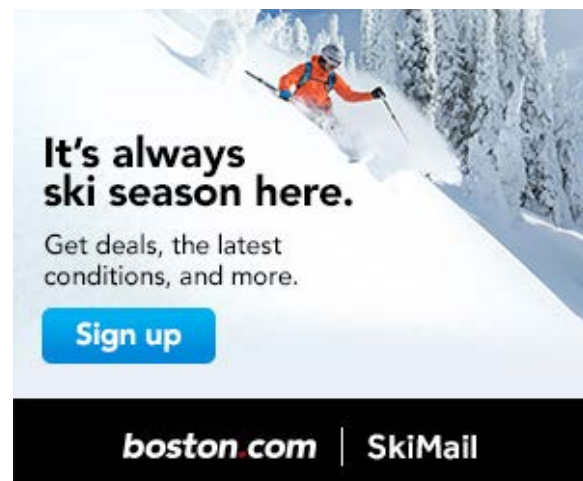
For vehicles deemed auction worthy, city officials mail a letter to the vehicle's owner to notify them. Vehicles can be [auctioned](#) after 30 days from when they are towed.

City data showed that vehicles were held for about 121 days from when they were towed before they were auctioned.

Owners of vehicles that get crushed or auctioned can be [billed to cover fees](#) incurred by the city related to towing, storing, and getting rid of the vehicle.

For a vehicle owner to recover an abandoned car once it has been towed away, the vehicle would have to be actively registered and insured and the person picking it up would need to show a valid driver's license and pay fees for towing and storage.

City records show that most vehicles, about 52 percent, wind up being crushed, but a fair amount, about 37 percent get released back to the owner or to a lien company. (Only about 8 percent get auctioned.)



What happens to abandoned vehicles that get towed

Data cover vehicles labeled abandoned between fall 2009 and mid-2015. Hover over or click on the charts to learn more.

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How long abandoned vehicles are held after towed

A look at how many days pass on average from when abandoned vehicles are towed away by the city until they are disposed of either by being crushed, auctioned, or released by to the owner or a lein company. Data are from the fall of 2009 through mid-2015.

Disposal type	Average days held
Crushed	30
Auctioned	121
Released	20

Data also showed that in about a half dozen cases the same vehicle was tagged as abandoned, towed to a city lot, and released back to its owner two times.

City officials said those were likely cases in which the owner, on multiple occasions, left their vehicle parked on a city street without a license plate attached, or had multiple lapses in their insurance or vehicle registration. Officials said state law prohibits storing an uninsured or unregistered vehicle on a public road.

Transportation department officials said they could not remember any cases in which a vehicle was crushed or auctioned that was not actually abandoned.

But it has happened before, back in a time when abandoned vehicles were much more common on city streets.

In 1989, a vehicle parked in Brighton and owned by a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was tagged, towed, and crushed in one day. The student said he usually took the bus to get around and used his 1970 Volvo less frequently, primarily for shopping errands and trips to his native Canada.

It's unclear how many other vehicles may have been mistakenly deemed abandoned and were either towed away or disposed of, but there were at least some other complaints at the time.

Such cases highlighted a potential pitfall of a state law, which had gone into effect in the fall of 1988 at the urging of city officials in Boston, that said cars left unattended for 72 hours can be considered abandoned. The law allowed city officials to remove abandoned cars in a faster fashion and without court approval.

Back then, abandoned cars were a much more prevalent. For example, the city towed more than 11,000 abandoned vehicles in 1988 alone.

A Globe article back then summed up the situation:

“The abandoned-car problem mushroomed in 1987 and 1988 as the bottom fell out of the scrap-metal market and two large auto shredders were shut down for several months because state environmental officials contended they were creating toxic waste.

Instead of being paid by companies for the right to tow cars, Boston began having to pay companies to remove them. Car owners, faced with paying fees instead of receiving bounties for

disposing of their cars, began dumping them on city streets by the thousands.

In 1984, the city was being offered \$37 per abandoned car by towers. By 1986, the best offer was from a towing firm that wanted \$12 from the city for each car towed. In 1987, the city had no bidders, which led the Transportation Department to form its own junker-towing fleet.”

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