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Sept. 1 Moving Day is a nightmare. What if we changed it?

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Among the possible Moving Day disruptions is a moving truck getting stuck on Storrow Drive.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Editor's note: This is part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. For more stories, [click here](#).

Like clockwork, bedlam descends upon the Boston area every Sept. 1. Moving vehicles clog the streets, parking is a nightmare, and sidewalks are buried in trash and household items. The cause of the annual headache is known as Moving Day, when an estimated two-thirds of the city's 165,000-plus apartment leases turn over.

Does it have to be this chaotic? Perhaps not.

Montreal has long endured similar disruptions because of mass moves, which used to occur there every May 1. But decades ago, its moving day was shifted to July 1, which falls on a national holiday. As a result, the pain has of that day eased somewhat.

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“Indeed, there is less traffic and people do not have to miss work in order to move,” said Jules Chamberland-Lajoie, a spokesman for the City of Montreal.

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Because the date falls each year on Canada Day, moves can take place without the usual crush of commuters, and there's no need for Montreal to deploy additional municipal workers to help manage traffic. The city also deploys most trash pickup and street cleanup crews in the days after July 1 to save on holiday pay.

New York once had a crazy moving day. It took a world war to end it.

New York's May 1 moving day was phased out after a war, rent control, and a housing shortage.

The problem? Boston doesn't recognize Canada Day. And even if it did, a move-in day in July, or on an existing holiday at some other time of the year, wouldn't really be sensible in a city where leases that start just before the school year are convenient for many residents, including college students and families.

Could the city shift an existing celebration to Sept. 1 or create a new holiday? Probably not. But perhaps the city could treat Moving Day here like a blizzard, advising all public and private "nonessential" employees to work from home .

Even in Montreal, having the move occur on a holiday doesn't completely alleviate problems, said Jean-Philippe Warren, a sociology and anthropology professor at Concordia University, based in the city, who has researched the history of Moving Day there. He explained that July 1 — the national holiday called Canada Day — is not the kind of fête that brings life to a near-standstill, like July Fourth, Thanksgiving, or Christmas do in the United States.

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“July 1st’s holiday doesn’t apply to public transportation, restaurants, libraries, groceries, drugstores, etc.,” Warren wrote in an e-mail. But “it may smooth the craziness of it all a little.”

Montreal’s Moving Day is believed to date back to the 1700s and was enshrined in regulations as the apartment turnover date in the 1800s, Chamberland-Lajoie said.

By the 1970s, as part of a broader tenants’ rights movement, the May 1 moving date began to be contested, particularly by families who had to move their children to a new home, sometimes to a new school, just before the end of the academic year, Chamberland-Lajoie said.

In 1974, government officials voted to change the lease turnover date to July 1, a date picked because it fell at a convenient time of year; the fact that it was a holiday was a bonus.

Since then, officials there have done away with rules requiring leases to start and end on certain dates.

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Some apartments in Montreal change hands at other times during the year. But many leases still turn over July 1. An estimated 200,000 to 250,000 households in Quebec, or about 20 percent of renters provincewide, move each year around Canada Day.

In Boston, where Moving Day is complicated by the crush of returning students in several neighborhoods, you might have heard people describe the days around Sept. 1 as “[Allston Christmas](#).” But it’s not a holiday; it’s a nickname for the tradition in which some people dump furniture and other household items on the curb while moving, which are subsequently scooped up to be reused by neighbors.

(In [Madison, Wis.](#), another city where many people — primarily college students — move at once around mid-August, the equivalent is called “[Hippie Christmas](#).”)

Officials in Boston and other cities with popular moving days said that while having so many people on the move simultaneously can make life hectic for a day or two, there are benefits.

Leases here are typically 12-month agreements, and for a renter whose lease ends on the same date as most others’, that does, to be sure, mean some added competition when it comes time to look for an apartment, but also lots of selection.

“If you’re off that schedule, you might find the pickings pretty slim,” said John Russick, vice president for interpretation and education at the Chicago History Museum, a [city](#) with two popular moving dates — Oct. 1 and May 1. “As a renter, you kind of want to be on that schedule.”

Another upside is that renters can move to a new place without having to try to break their lease early, or find another place to live for only a few weeks or months.

“Since almost everyone is swapping apartments on the same day, you do not have to move out of an apartment to go to another place that will only be available two months later,” Warren said.

In Boston, the Sept. 1 date also makes sense from a practical and scheduling standpoint, not only for the area’s numerous college students, but for other residents, including families with schoolchildren who want to be settled by the time classes start around Labor Day.

Moving at many other times of the year would come with their own inconveniences: too hot, too cold,

or too disruptive to school, work, and vacations, real estate officials said.

Boston officials said Tuesday the city has taken steps in recent years to try to curb the move-in chaos, including by encouraging landlords to adjust Sept. 1 leases by a few days and to make repairs and do maintenance before apartments turn over instead of on Moving Day. The city said it has worked with colleges on spreading out start dates for classes.

“This weekend we still expect it to be busy, there’s no doubt about it,” said William Christopher, commissioner of the city’s Inspectional Services Department. But, in light of the recent changes, “we think we’ve got much better results with student move-in process” the past couple of years.

Local history and real estate experts said they weren’t certain why Sept. 1 became such a popular moving day in Boston, but it extends back decades and probably developed gradually. It was almost certainly dictated by the market demand of the area’s many college students, they said.

Edward Zuker, founder and chief executive officer of Chestnut Hill Realty, said July 1 has also cropped up as a common moving date because of another dominant industry here.

“Because of the turnover at hospitals,” he said. “That’s when the new doctors come in and the interns.”

But Zuker and others said they don’t see Boston’s tradition of mass migrations on a limited number of dates fading soon.

“It makes it difficult to manage, but that’s what the market is,” he said. “Our economy is driven by the universities and the hospitals.”

Part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com.

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