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THINGS THAT WORK

This N.H. town couldn't 'bear' it any longer — so it passed an ordinance

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NEW HAMPSHIRE FISH AND GAME

Bears ate from a trash can in Hanover, N.H., in April.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 07, 2017

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](#).

LINCOLN, N.H. — Once upon a time, a wild group of visitors developed something of a reputation in this small tourist town, home to Loon Mountain as well as parts of White Mountain National Forest.

The brutes routinely descended upon homes and businesses, damaging property, littering, and generally causing a commotion. One of the ruffians' favorite places to ransack: Dunkin' Donuts.

Something had to be done, to protect residents and the furry intruders themselves. So town leaders resorted to a mundane, but effective, municipal weapon: They passed an ordinance to keep the bears at bay.

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With these increasingly brazen creatures besieging communities across New England, many cities and towns have struggled to persuade citizens — through awareness campaigns or public pleas — to secure their trash, bird feeders, and other sources of food. Lincoln's simple ordinance, with levies of up to \$500 for irresponsible food and garbage storage, seems to be doing the trick.

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Similar regulations enacted elsewhere — either locally or statewide in other parts of New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Colorado, Florida, Washington, and parts of Canada — have also proven successful at curbing human-bear encounters, according to officials in those places.



In Chelsea, coalition aims to save lives on verge of unraveling

“Maybe I can’t help, but now I can connect you to someone who I know can help you. One person can’t lift a car off a person, but 10 people can.”

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Paris offers a model to bring swimming to Charles River

When well-enforced, bear experts say, such local ordinances and bylaws are much more effective than simply educating residents and business owners and seeking voluntary compliance.

“When these ordinances are properly enforced, bears respond by moving on,” said Andrew Timmins, wildlife biologist and bear project leader at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. “They follow their nose. Once the cafeteria’s closed, they leave.”

Other tactics to keep bears away — such as using chemical repellents, trying to scare them with noise, deploying specially trained dogs, and even shooting rubber bullets at them — don’t always work or can bring only temporary results, experts said.

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Electric fencing has proven successful at keeping bears away from chicken coops, beekeeping hives, and orchards, as long as the fencing is properly installed and maintained. But there’s a cost to that.

Massachusetts officials said they know of only one community with an ordinance on bear feeding: the city of Northampton. William H. Dwight, city council president in Northampton, said the ordinance was [adopted](#) in 2012 not so much because of issues with trash or bird feeders, but because a small number of residents were intentionally feeding bears.



CHERYL SENTER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Many years' worth of trash was strewn in a wooded strip between a walking trail and local businesses in Lincoln, N.H.

In Lincoln, the town's 2003 ordinance requires residents and businesses to keep garbage inside a home or garage, or to store it outside in a bear-proof trash can or dumpster.

The ordinance also bars anyone from feeding or baiting bears. While the rule doesn't outlaw bird feeders, residents can be fined if their feeders start to attract bears, said Ron Beard, who serves as fire chief, health officer, and code compliance officer in this town of about 1,300 residents.

Beard said violators are typically issued a warning first; the goal is not to collect fines, but to gain compliance.

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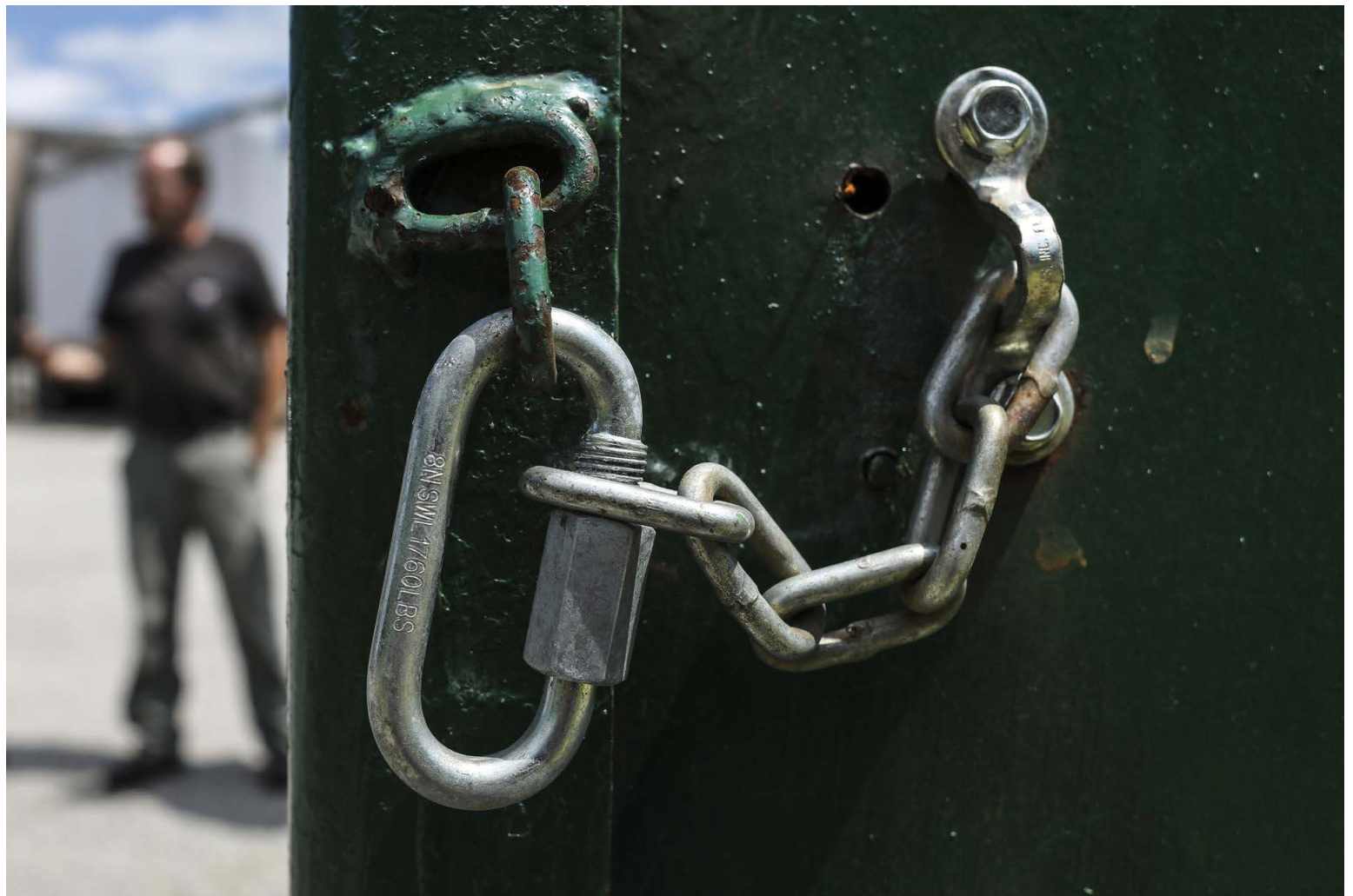




Most bear issues in Lincoln once arose along Main Street, lined with fast-food joints, cafes, ice cream and pizza shops, convenience stores, a supermarket, and a movie theater. It's a fun area to hang out, and not just for people.

“Bears like buttered popcorn and candy, and they don't mind Mexican food once in a while, too,” Beard said.

But the threat of fines encouraged most businesses to secure their dumpsters, including replacing plastic tops — which bears can easily claw open or crush with their bodies — with metal ones. They also must lock dumpsters and empty any trash cans that sit outside their stores.



CHERYL SENTER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A dumpster behind Price Chopper in Lincoln, N.H., was properly secured against bears.

In the three years before the ordinance took effect, Lincoln officials fielded about 15 to 25 bear complaints per year, according to data tracked by the town. In most years since, there have typically been only about five complaints or fewer.

Three other towns in New Hampshire have enacted similar ordinances: Franconia in 2007, Gorham in 2009, and Bethlehem in 2010. Timmins, the state bear project leader, said those towns haven't had quite the same success as Lincoln, and attributed that to lighter enforcement.

"It really comes down to enforcement. In towns where officials are kind of lax about it — that's where we see failures," he said.

Timmins said other communities in New Hampshire have considered adopting similar ordinances, including Hanover, where [controversy](#) erupted recently when state officials proposed killing three young bears that had entered a home where children live. After the outcry, the state's governor

[intervened](#) and the bears were instead captured and [relocated](#).

Bear hunting, allowed in many states, can be an effective way to manage bear populations and also prevent bears from becoming comfortable around humans, some experts say. But it's controversial, and some contend it is both reactionary and focused on trying to change the behavior of the wrong group.

"It's not the bears that are a nuisance or a problem. It's that people are leaving food out for bears," said Richard Beausoleil, a bear specialist with the Washington state Department of Fish & Wildlife. "Unless you address the cause, you're going to have a repeat performance."

In Lincoln, officials said making sure the ordinance continues to work requires dedication. They said the Dunkin' Donuts store there has been particularly problematic. Despite repeated fines and warnings, the store has failed to invest in a metal dumpster top.

On a recent afternoon, trash was strewn in a wooded area at the edge of the Dunkin' parking lot — a sign, officials said, that bears had been there. The store was given a verbal warning.



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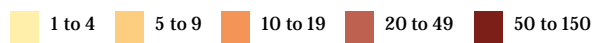
A ripped bag of trash hung out of a poorly secured dumpster behind Dunkin Donuts in Lincoln, N.H.

In a statement, the company said it believes the store’s dumpster — with a metal-framed plastic lid — is bear-proof. Nonetheless, “To further prevent animals from accessing the dumpster, the franchisee has informed us that he is taking proactive steps to strengthen it with a full metal lid.”

Where the bears are

Figures below show, for each city and town, the number of bear encounter reports made to Environmental Police between 2011 and 2015, as well as reports made to MassWildlife between 2010 and 2013.

State data show reports of bear conflicts have soared from the single- and low-double-digits in the 1980s and early 1990s to well into the hundreds in more recent years. In 2013, the most recent year for which figures were available from both Environmental Police and MassWildlife, there were more than 600 bear encounters reports statewide. Bear populations in the western and central parts of the state — areas they have long roamed — have surged, and bears have expanded their territory eastward, frequently turning up in neighborhoods and backyards in Greater Boston.



SOURCE: Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
MATT ROCHELEAU / GLOBE STAFF

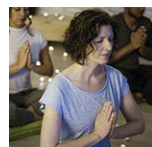
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