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A sign of the times

Story By: LIZ FINNEGAN, Editor

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ISLIP TOWN — It's a pervasive problem that seems to be getting worse: sign stealing. Islip has had to replace hundreds of stolen signs around the town and since scrap metal has increased in value recently, it's an expensive problem that's also difficult to curtail.

Islip DPW (Department of Public Works) Commissioner Richard Baker said that he's seen an increase in missing signage over the past six months. On one street in Bayport alone, the same street sign had to be replaced four times. "They're stealing signs like crazy," Baker remarked. "And it's happening all over Islip Town." He said that the problem has been reported to police. Those signs include street names, stop signs, as well as others that indicate No Parking or Dead End. All of the signs are made of aluminum and could be sold for scrap metal.

Baker said that with approximately 200,000 signs around the Town of Islip, it could cost the town thousands of dollars or more to replace them.

"It's getting expensive," he said. "For every mile of town roadway, there must be 50 or 60 signs."

And it's time consuming, too. Every stolen sign must be reordered, there's a wait period for manufacturing and then it takes two town workers to reinstall it.

Gershow Recycling, which regularly purchases scrap metal, has several locations on Long Island, the most local of which is in Bay Shore. They pay 50 cents for every pound of aluminum, the metal used in the production of most metal signage.

John Zahr, a spokesperson for Gershow, said that the company requires photo identification, such as a driver's license, from everyone that sells them scrap metal, which could come from all different sources. That information is put into a computer. He added that the company works closely with police and would report anything suspicious.

In Islip, a different type of sign was recently stolen from Overton's Funeral Home on Main Street. That one was made of wood.

Overton director Eric Buehler said that the theft was discovered early in the day on May 14.

"It was a solid oak sign... that weighed around 100 pounds, which my great grandfather put up in the 1930s," he said. "We reported it to the police, but it was probably just a kids' prank."

Buehler said his friends with businesses in East Islip also had their signs stolen that weekend, but didn't know if they were constructed of wood or metal.

"I waited a week to order a new one," he said, hoping it would be returned.

"Now we're thinking of ways to make the new sign theft-proof."

The Historical Society of Islip Hamlet (HSIH) has sign issues as well. Recently, a heavy aluminum historic marker identifying the site on Route 111 where Islip Speedway was once located was apparently cut off and carted away.

"It's sad and disheartening that people would steal from a not-for-profit [organization]," said HSIH president Vicki Berger. "Now I'm concerned that the rest of our [metal] signs will become a target."

Berger said she'd ask members to routinely check the society's other historic markers and immediately report those missing. As for the missing sign, she said, "We'll do what we can to replace it."

Islip Town Supervisor Phil Nolan said, regarding the problem, "We need the eyes and ears of the community," and urged anyone who sees suspicious activity to take down car license plates and turn that information over to the police.

Baker said that even though the sign thefts have been an annoying and expensive problem, he's even more concerned about the increasing theft of metal storm grates and drain covers, which could be even more costly, in a

different way.
"Someone could lose a life," he noted.

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