

'Sign posse' removes, tosses illegal signage

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Paul Allen's crusade against "pollution on a stick" started two years ago when someone put a real estate sign in the yard of his corner-lot home in Norcross.

"My wife, who's a recovering attorney, looked up the law and said it's like abandoned property or litter like a coffee cup," Allen said. "So I pulled it up."



LAURA NOEL/AJC

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Paul Allen pulls down illegally placed signs along Jimmy Carter Boulevard.

Allen soon found several people of like mind, and now they have a looseknit organization that County Commissioner Bert Nasuti fondly calls his "sign posse." Its 15 or so members routinely troll the county's highways and byways for temporary signs illegally placed in public rights of way, which they cheerfully yank up and toss in their vehicles to be thrown away later.

The group is made up of retirees, a police officer, a real estate agent, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention employee, a graphics company manager, even a former Gwinnett County resident who now lives in Rockdale County.

All are bound by a common loathing of temporary signs lining streets, signs that advertise real estate, insurance, get-rich-quick schemes and home improvement businesses. And all are versed in the Gwinnett County ordinance that says signs cannot be placed in the public rights of way.

"They're like trash," Allen said. "Throwing them away is like putting garbage in a can. They hurt property values."

For Gwinnett police Lt. J.T. Strickland, a posse member, it's a safety issue as well.

"They put them at intersections where they create a safety hazard for people trying to turn," he said.

Members of the group were acting independently, but they found each other through the Internet, through referrals by the county code enforcement staff or through Nasuti. Aided by the Web, they became loosely organized, with some members patrolling certain areas of the county. They e-mail each other trophy pictures of trunks full of signs they've harvested that day.

"I've only met one of them, but I feel like I'm friends with all of them," Strickland said.

Allen said the group tries to be sensible about its enforcement efforts. Members don't pull up garage sale signs, or lost puppy signs, or signs they know will be gone in a day or so. It's mainly the commercial signs they're after.

Allen goes out almost every day to find them, and he'll take round-about ways on errands to see whether he can find any signs. Others tour the countryside once or twice a week.

When they find a sign, or better, a rash of signs, they'll find a safe spot to park and go to work.

"A lot of times, people will stop or slow down and ask, 'What are you doing?' or 'Can you do that?' " Allen said. "One time, I was pulling signs at one ramp at I-85 and Indian Trail, and across the street was somebody else doing the same thing. We said, 'Hi there.' I've never met him again."

Often, they'll call the telephone number on the signs or send an e-mail gently telling the offender that they're in violation of the law.

"A lot of times, people don't know it's illegal," Allen said. "Or they'll argue that it's freedom of speech. But commercial speech is not protected."

If the sign abuse continues, they'll go to work tracking down the company behind it. They frequently take a picture of the signs and their location to help the county in case it has to prosecute.

Andrew Mendzef of the county's code compliance section said ferreting out company ownership can be a tedious and complicated effort.

"Often, these companies are somebody working out of their home with a cellphone and an answering machine," Mendzef said. "A lot of them are based out of state."

Menzef said the posse has played a role in a handful of prosecutions in the past year and has forwarded dozens of reports to his office for warning letters.

George Moore of Norcross helped track down a frequent offender, an insurance company, all the way to Oklahoma. He provided the county with the information necessary to prosecute the company in Recorder's Court. Last year, Recorder's Court Judge Patti Muise fined one insurance agent \$1,000 and another \$2,000, a grand per sign. The company quit posting signs on the streets.

Sometimes such community service is not appreciated. Allen has been the victim of such pranks as having his mail and water cut off and has been the recipient of unsolicited gay literature. Others have been threatened when they call the companies.

The companies sometimes respond in other ways.

"They've learned our schedules," he said. "We were going out Saturday mornings so they were waiting until Sunday afternoon so they could have their signs up all week."

Strickland recalled another attempt to deter the posse and other homegrown enforcers.

"There was a sign that had on it, 'This sign is being monitored by the Gwinnett County Police Department and you will be prosecuted if this sign is removed,'" he said with a laugh. He pulled it up.