What do junk, weeds and animals have in common?

City of Holyoke codes govern all three, and these were the main areas of focus targeted by Holyoke City Council when a part-time code enforcement officer position was created a year ago.

Full-time police officers lacked the time needed to consistently enforce the codes and to educate the community to better understand the laws on the books.

Dawn Archibeque was hired for the position, and immediately began wading through the two-inch thick notebook of municipal codes for the City of Holyoke.

The realm of concern for the code enforcement officer falls much further than junk, weeds and animals, however. Zoning, building, subdivisions, vehicles and traffic, streets and sidewalks and basic health and safety are all regulated by city codes.

Many of the codes have been in place close to 35 years, and with an ever-changing population, it's important to educate everyone on the laws that make Holyoke a community to be proud of.

Archibeque emphasized there has to be a process created that deals with everyone equally.

She sees her position as one in which she works hard to be a conduit of information for people. She has resources and helpful information to assist residents to stay in line with the codes.

Unfortunately, there is an enforcement piece to the position sometimes. It's not her favorite part, but it's there.

Archibeque is quick to point out the codes are on the books for a reason. Holyoke takes pride in its cleanliness, well-kept property and safe environment. That's the reason junk ordinances, weed/grass directives and dogs-at-large laws—to name just a few—are in place.

This week, City Code Chatter (CCC) kicks off with information about weed and animal codes. Future CCCs will target other areas of code education, issues at the local forefront or law enforcement info that is pertinent to the community.

**Dogs-at-large policy**

Dogs are not allowed to run at-large, according to city policy. However, there's no directive in the ordinance as to what's to be done with these dogs if they're picked up.

Police Chief Phil Biersdorfer emphatically notes they don't shoot dogs after holding them for a time. For one thing, there's no local holding facility. And clearly there is NOT a policy to shoot stray dogs.

The police chief said the department has downed a couple of vicious animals, but in general, they don't shoot dogs.

Archibeque said she is looking at a number of options to help house stray dogs until arrangements are made for their care. She said she has worked with a no-kill shelter in Grant, Neb., as well as the Logan County Humane Society in Sterling.

It's a developmental process as solutions are sought, she added. There's some cost involved in holding dogs until a place can be found for them, and sometimes fees are tied to the shelters they're accepted at. Fund raising options are being looked at, as well as other alternatives, such as cooperative foster care.

Biersdorfer said there's a building at the pole barn that can possibly be made into a very temporary shelter. Officers have oftentimes taken stray dogs home, and he doesn't feel they should be responsible for that.

Dogs in Holyoke are required to be licensed at a minimal cost of $10 for a two-year license.

The purpose of this is to be able to identify dogs that are loose and to verify shots are up to date.

Acknowledging dogs can get away, even from responsible owners, there is a warning provision in the city ordinance. Dog-at-large fines are on a tiered system, starting at $50 for the first offense (following a warning), $75 for the second and mandatory court appearance for the third.

**Weeds/grass notices are not citations for court**

Because of the move towards consistency in assessing weed and tall grass situations in Holyoke, many more landlords and/or tenants have received notices telling them of the ordinance.

This has become a sore subject for some, as it seems to appear or feel like it's a court citation.

Archibeque said she prefers to look at the notice as an invitation to stop by the police office or give her a call. Because many aren't home when she's doing her job in the daytime, it makes direct contact more difficult unless the homeowner or tenant makes the call-back contact.

In her first contact efforts, Archibeque learned much about whether it's the landlord or the renter who's responsible for yard care. The process for making contact with people is constantly evolving as she finds ways that work.

She initially was including a copy of the ordinance with the notice left at the property. However, finding people didn't necessarily read that, she started including pieces of the info in the notice she left.

Sometimes she leaves a notice as a result of a complaint from another citizen, not from her own observation.

But in general, the written notices are a matter of documentation of actions, which are required in many governmental positions such as this one.

Archibeque sincerely hopes people will initiate the verbal communication with her after she's left an informational notice.

She tries to drive by every street each week, but sometimes in trying to find people at home, she might drive a street several times. "It's all situation-based," she added, noting she also drives through all the alleys in town.

Archibeque said she keeps a weekly mental log of rainfall, trying to be understanding when weather conditions have not been suitable for mowing.

She said she works very hard to give people leeway, but appreciates them letting her know if circumstances are involved. She added a majority of the community does a good job of this.

Contrary to what many believe, Archibeque said she's written very few citations. Most of what she does involves reminders or notices.

Noxious weed ordinances are in place so the weeds don't choke out desired vegetation. The major weeds cited are dandelions, thistle, goatheads and bindweed.

Anything over a 10-inch growth length with regard to grass or weeds is in violation.

But if anyone has a question about any of the codes, they are encouraged to contact Archibeque at the Police Department. Messages can be left for her at 854-2342 or her voice mail at the Comm Center at 854-2244.

Her position is budgeted for an average 20 hours per week. She is usually in her office in the police department at 407 E. Denver St. by 9 a.m. most weekdays.

**Junk ordinances next**

Part of the junk ordinances in the City of Holyoke will be addressed in the next CCC article on June 18.

Those who have codes they would like to see explored for future CCC columns should contact the Enterprise office at 854-2811.