

Somerville's system model for state ticketing bill

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Wicked Local Somerville

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Somerville — When someone is issued a ticket for not clearing their sidewalk or improperly storing trash, and the person decides not to pay, many cities and towns across the state are left with few options to collect that money. But a bill that recently passed the State House of Representatives aims to change that.

The “green tickets” bill would allow municipalities to put liens on the property of people who don’t pay up and would establish a local body to hear ticket appeals, which would keep disputes out of court. The bill has already passed the House and Senate once, only to be pocket-vetoed by Gov. Deval Patrick, said Rep. Denise Provost, D-Somerville, one of the bill’s co-sponsors.

“It had very strong support from city governments because cities have the greatest problems with neglected properties, often owned by landlords who are irresponsible or absentee or, increasingly, owned by banks that have foreclosed,” Provost said.

If passed, the bill would mimic systems already in place in Somerville.

“The new law also provides for a ‘municipal hearing officer’ to be used in municipalities in lieu of having such ticket violation appeals heard by the local district court. We had previously conceived of that idea, and Mayor [Joe] Curtatone pushed for it to become a state law in 2008,” said city spokesperson Jackie Rossetti.

Somerville was given authority through a home-rule petition in 1996 to place liens on property owners who don’t pay their fines. Somerville also was allowed to have a municipal hearing officer in 2008.

For other cities and towns, having a municipal hearing officer would give alleged offenders an easier way to appeal tickets and save the city time and money.

“As a matter of documented fact, in a lot of communities, fewer than half of tickets that are issued are ever paid. The cost and time and personnel involved in taking someone to court is prohibitive,” said Provost.

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