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# IN THE ZONE: New zoning officer aims to enforce codes, make town better place for all

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Celeste Logothets turns the town-issued Ford Crown Victoria up the driveway of a Valley Road business and pulls out a black disposable pen.

She notices the Dumpster isn't enclosed by fencing or shrubs and is visible from the street, a violation of Middletown ordinances. Logothets scribbles a few notes on a yellow legal pad, information to be used to compile a notice of violation, which will be mailed to the property owner in a few weeks.

One of her initial duties as the town's new part-time zoning enforcement officer, Logothets said, is letting businesses know they can expect hefty fines for improper Dumpster coverage.

That might catch some off guard because it is the first time Middletown has had an employee who is solely responsible for staying on top of the town's zoning codes.

"We want to work with everyone. We're not here to punish them," Logothets said. "At the same time, people need to realize the ordinances are what they are and it's not OK to have banners flying or an unshielded Dumpster wherever you want it. We don't want the place looking like Las Vegas."

## Needs to be addressed

During the past few years, it's become a common occurrence at local meetings: a home or business owner approaches the Town Council complaining that a particular sign doesn't meet code, that a detention pond isn't properly being cared for or that some business isn't shutting off its lights at the right time.

Then, resident Arthur Benner stands, reminding the council that in most cases the rules governing such offenses are on the town's books, but they just aren't being enforced.

Enter Logothets, who was selected from a pool of 11 candidates. Jack Kane — who is in charge of the town's Building Department and oversees Logothets — said she has adjusted quite well to the position, one he's happy to have filled.

Kane said it's not that the concerns about zoning violations weren't important in the past, but when it's a question of either dealing with the safety of a home or office building or checking in on some temporary banner flapping in the wind, safety concerns win out.

"With Celeste on board, it will give us more of a chance to get out there and be proactive with zoning compliance," Kane said. "Before, it was all complaint driven and a question of priorities.

"When we had time, we would address these sorts of issues, but now we have someone specifically dedicated to the area, it frees us up more to deal with the building codes while improving the quality of life around Middletown."

Kane said the goal of the effort isn't to make life difficult for anyone, but to help the town be a better place for everyone.

"We're not out there looking to fine anyone," Kane said. "We're looking for compliance and to clean things up, so it's a more pleasant place to be and a safer place to be."

Benner said he is pleased to see the town stepping up and addressing the concerns.

"I've been after them three or four years about this," he said. "It's good to see we have a new zoning enforcement officer, but the one problem they might have is for some of these things, we don't have penalties. That's something they might have to look into."

### **On the job**

Before she started the job a couple of weeks ago, Logothets was a nursing assistant at the Heatherwood nursing home in Newport and, more recently, a licensed real-estate appraiser. Now, she typically is on duty Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 8 a.m.-3 p.m., working out of the Building Department on the second floor of Town Hall.

Logothets said she still is learning the ins and outs of the town's zoning rules, although she is feeling more comfortable every day. The assistance of her colleagues has helped ease the transition, she said.

"I saw the job advertised in the paper and said, 'I could do that,'" Logothets said. "My background the last four years in appraising really helps out quite a bit. I don't think people realize how much work goes into appraising a piece of property and how time consuming it is."

In addition to stepping up the oversight of the town's Dumpster regulations - approved in September 2002 at the urging of then Councilman Charles J. Vaillancourt - Logothets said she will be trying to boost compliance with other zoning ordinances.

Those include cracking down on unregistered motor vehicles stored on residential properties and Middletown's sign ordinances.

So far, she's found almost everyone has been pretty receptive to what she's trying to do.

"It's all how you approach it, but I've had a few businesses sic their lawyers on me, but that goes with the job," Logothets said. "As long as the screaming and yelling stays to a minimum."

She said keys to getting the job done with minimal strife include fair treatment of everyone, a constant, even demeanor, and a baggie of dog cookies to give to barking canines.

"I think most people just want to be treated fairly," Logothets said. "If you explain to them why you're doing what you're doing, they'll usually understand."