

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 6, 1999 □ THE TAMPA TRIBUNE □ BAYLIFE — 3

DOGS/ It's rare to see scoopers in action

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pooper-scooper law, which has been around since 1973, Roberts says.

To urge dog owners to "doo" the right thing, St. Petersburg has installed dispensers of free plastic bags in some of its more heavily used parks.

The white-and-black bags, called "Mutt Mitts," switch from being a plastic glove to a little garbage bag when turned inside-out after picking things up.

STILL, IT IS rare to see someone actually complying.

Just drive anywhere in the city, especially before 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m., and you'll likely see that most dog walkers aren't carrying anything to clean up after their pets.

Unless they're like Mark Chambers, who was walking his Weimaraner recently at Flora Wylie Park near downtown St. Petersburg.

Chambers promptly pulls a plastic grocery bag from his pants pocket when asked if he is aware of the city's pooping-pooch prohibition.

"It doesn't bother me," he says of cleaning up after his pet. "I know she can't do it."

Scooping poop is just part of the responsibility that comes with owning a dog, especially in an urban area, Chambers says.

"If you're out here and your dog's pooping all over the place and you're just like, 'Yeah, whatever,' you'll be shunned by the dog community that's out here."

Some dog owners who don't usually clean up after their pets have plenty of excuses: It's biodegradable; it washes away in the rain; it helps the grass grow.

"It's fertilizer, more or less. What's the harm?" says Bo Robertson while walking his German shorthaired pointer at Crescent Lake Park in northeast St. Petersburg.

Robertson says he doesn't feel bad when his dog answers nature's call in such places as a field or an empty lot. But he'd feel guilty if it used someone else's yard, and he would clean up the mess.

"It's just a matter of common sense and courtesy, really," he says.

Robertson says the city's ordinance has some value, as long as it's not carried to the extreme.

"I definitely don't want to see a whole neighborhood of people who have dogs walking with a pail and a shovel," he says. "That takes the whole enjoyment out of walking your dog."

So is his city going to the dogs? St. Petersburg Mayor David Fischer says no.

Fischer says he hasn't heard any complaints from individuals or any of the city's 90 neighborhood groups about people who deliberately choose to walk away from their dog's leavings.

The mayor believes most dog owners are aware of the ordinance and abide by it. He says it helps compel people to comply voluntarily and wasn't meant to be strictly enforced.

"I do see people walking along Coffee Pot with scoopers," says Fischer, who doesn't own a dog.

IN TAMPA, CITY attorneys say the pooper-scooper ordinance is enforced primarily by code enforcement inspectors.

While no Tampa police officers are assigned to poop patrol, they can issue citations or warnings at their discretion, says police spokesman Steve Cole.

Tampa's ordinance, on the books since at least 1989, was adopted in part to keep popular Bayshore Boulevard a poop-free zone, Cole says. It deals with the removal of all "animal excrement," not just dog waste, like St. Petersburg's.

Dogs and other animals that assist law enforcement or the disabled are exempt.

Tampa sees perhaps 10 dog-dung cases a year, says Bill Doherty, the city's code enforcement manager. Most involve complaints about a dog defecating on a neighbor's property.

"People do get upset about it," Doherty says. "When you're looking out the window and see a dog doing its business on your lawn, it is offensive."

As in St. Petersburg, most offenders in Tampa get off with a warning, he says.

"We get the address of the property of the individual and the offending animal, and send them a letter that we got a complaint," he says. "That usually does it."

While dog owners can be taken before Tampa's code enforcement board or given a notice to appear in court, "that would be a last resort," Doherty says.

He can't recall the last time either happened.

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CLEAN/ Entrepreneurs smell an opportunity

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"It's not a pleasant thing to do," says Jean Lima, an Oldsmar resident who started her Mary POOPins business in July.

Lima, a media industry analyst who owns two dogs, says she got the idea for the service after scooping her own yard two or three times a week.

Her prices range from \$5.50 to \$8 per week, depending on the number of dogs and how often she cleans up a yard.

Though she has yet to land any customers, mostly because of a lack of advertising, Lima believes there's a market in the Tampa Bay area for her fledgling business and plans to make a serious go of it this year.

"My friends say it's a super

idea," Lima says. "My mother didn't think it was a very classy type of business to start, but I thought there was a need for it. And that was the key for me."

Tom and Linda Hicks of Fort Myers fell into the business much the same way.

While picking up after their German shepherd one evening, the couple imagined how nice it would be if someone would be willing to do it for them.

The next day, they checked around their Southwest Florida area and found no dog-waste removal companies. So in September, they started their own — Doggie Doo PU Service.

So, how's business?

"I wish I could say it's picking up," says Tom Hicks, who also owns and manages rental proper-

ties on Fort Myers Beach. "But it's kind of a unique idea. I think people aren't, at this point, grasping it."

The Hickses do have three clients. One is elderly, one is disabled and one is a young woman who just doesn't want to mess with manure.

They charge \$7.50 per dog per week, plus \$2.50 for each additional dog, with discounts to seniors and those with special needs.

When they're not out scooping poop, they're spreading the word about their business.

"Hopefully we're on the ground floor of something," says Hicks, comparing his venture to the novelty of lawn care services 15 or 20 years ago.

A professional pooper-scooper in Ohio claims to have cleaned up

by cleaning up after people's dogs.

Matthew Osborn has a home page on the Web — <http://www.pooper-scooper.com> — where he tells would-be entrepreneurs how a business he started with \$150 grew to rake in more than \$20,000 a month from as many as 700 clients.

His Web site has several categories, including national and international lists of dog-waste removal services with names such as Canine Caddy, Scooperman, Poop Busters and Dr. Doo Litter.

There's also a message board, a list of places that have enacted "pooper-scooper" laws, and a manual, at \$31.95, on how to start your own "low-cost, high-profit" dog cleaning service.