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STREET SIGN THEFT COSTS SOARING

City of Missoula crews recently replaced 79 street signs in one neighborhood, the result of theft.

The cost? \$6,488.65. We all pay the bill.

Thefts of street signs in the past few weeks have been more severe than any incidents that Traffic Services Coordinator Wayne Gravatt has seen in the past 15 years. Street signs have perennially turned up missing, but recently multiple blocks of signs have disappeared at the same time.

“We’ve never had anything remotely like this,” Gravatt said.

Gravatt and his crew make the signs for replacement and lately have taken to making them less attractive. Some of the especially theft-prone signs remain in place longer when they are abbreviated. Mary Jane Boulevard has become MJ BLVD. Missoula Avenue is MSLA AVE.

Other signs that are frequent targets of theft are Easy Street, streets named after states and streets named after people – Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Daniel, Flo and Scott Allen. Catchy and trendy names are stolen most often.

Street signs come in several lengths to accommodate the length of a street name: 24 inches, 30 inches and 36 inches. They cost \$21.50, \$26.50 and \$32.80. Other costs involved in replacing signs include the poles and other materials, labor and vehicle hours involved in installation. The annual budget for all signs and brackets is only \$10,000. The recent incident is a serious strain.

“My budget restraints can’t accommodate this kind of expense,” Gravatt said. “At a time when we’re watching our budget the most, they’re taxing it to the maximum.”

It’s not clear why the signs have started disappearing at an accelerated rate. Gravatt wonders if it is a new group initiation or scavenger hunt.

Street signs are made of aluminum, which is cheaper than steel but easier to bend off the top of a pole. A normal pole is 12 feet high with 30 inches of base in the ground.

Thieves apparently pull up in pickups and stand in the truck beds to steal the street signs. On Mary Jane Boulevard, the crew tried using a 14-foot pole as a deterrent.

“What they did then was they just pushed it over with a vehicle,” Gravatt said. “So we lost the pole too.”

Poles cost \$4 a foot.

Street signs are important beyond their cost. They also help people navigate the city by car, bicycle or foot. And they play a vital role with emergency vehicles, helping the drivers locate people in distress. Theft of a sign can put many people at risk.

Theft of street signs is a misdemeanor crime until it passes a value of \$1,500. A pattern of offenses by one person or a group of people could potentially be prosecuted as a felony.

Residents who see theft of street signs or see stolen street signs in windows and landlords who spot stolen signs in rentals can call Gravatt at 552-6372 or 239-6355 Mondays through Fridays from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Outside of those hours, please call 911.

“We need more eyes out there,” he said.

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