

Trying to get by the Dept. of Apathy & Incompetence

By LINDA PENNEY

There are nearly three million people living in the financially naked city of Philadelphia. Each year, hundreds of crimes are committed against the people of this city and their property. I carry Mace. My name's Penney; so is my husband's.

The story you are about to read is true. The crimes in question, though, are not the sort that can be

It isn't so much the crime in the streets as the criminal neglect in City Hall.

handled with Mace, police or jails. The names have been omitted to protect my family from retribution, i.e. a water bill showing \$1,442 in delinquency charges on our account. Or parking violation notices for times and dates we aren't even in town. You see, these things have already happened to us.

In 1988, my husband and I signed the mortgage agreement for our first home, unaware that we were embarking upon what could turn out to be a 30-year sentence with no chance of parole.

No one back then was predicting that this city shortly would be on the verge of financial collapse. And little did we know that owning a home in the city would prove to be a dramatic disappointment or that

the bureaucracy would conspire to make living here so unpleasant — on practically a daily basis.

Maybe for some megabucks owners of skyscrapers who are getting the tax break of the century, this city works. But from where I stand, a mere homeowner whose property taxes just went up and whose councilman is going to prison, this historical metropolis is the maze of

phone numbers I had to call to have *someone else's* abandoned refrigerator hauled away.

It is heated arguments with landlords of neighboring dwellings whose negligence has jeopardized the safety of my family.

It is discovering that someone keeps cutting down the impatiens I planted in a tree bed in front of my home.



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left the cab turned to obstruct our front door for an entire weekend.

And, it is having a subcontractor for the Water Department hack down a 60-foot ginkgo in front of our home to make room for construction equipment, when temporarily dismantling a streetlight would have achieved the same results. This action could have been avoided totally had the contractor obtained the prerequisite evaluation from the Fairmount Park Commission on whether it was necessary to cut down our 30-year-old tree. But the subcontractor was never informed by the Water Department about the proper procedure for such situations. Today our house, without the tree that shaded the second floor, is decidedly not the same one we fell in love with.

It's hard to believe that all of these things happened to the same family over a two-year period. But they are telling and frightening examples of the condition of our city's municipal services and its leadership.

For a lot of middle-income residents that I've spoken to, it is not the drugs, murders, burglaries and related crimes driving them to the suburbs. In fact, many such citizens never have been the victim of crime. They, like my husband and me, are the victims of another crime that hurts taxpayers in big cities: apathy and incompetence on the part of the municipal service system. We are disheartened with seeing our ever-increasing tax dollars pay for the perpetuation of posts filled by people who let too many details fall through ever-widening cracks.

I have written scores of letters, initiated hundreds of telephone

calls and donated many hours of my professional time to try to coax the apathy-encrusted cylinders of the system. On some occasions, when I have been able to get a modicum of satisfaction from city representatives, their solution is either inappropriate or its execution bungled. I am not encouraged.

I want to believe that there is hope for this city. The forthcoming election offers more candidates than ever with integrity and intelligence. The defeat of Councilman Francis Rafferty undoubtedly is a promising symbol of voters' burgeoning intolerance of stupidity and incompetence. And perhaps there are a handful of city service workers out there who genuinely care about doing their jobs well.

But the men who would be mayor and the candidates who would be members of Council should not lose sight of the fact that each time the average taxpayer hears about proposed new taxes or increases in the old ones, he or she immediately thinks about poor city services, the unanswered phone calls and letters to city service departments, unsatisfactory resolutions to problems and the overall disgust that one has to make calls and write letters in the first place.

As for my family and me, we're not sure if we'll remain in the city. We have some time to think about it. But if life in the suburbs means coming home at night and flopping down on the sofa, I think I'd prefer it to coming home at night and dealing with an abandoned sofa. Those are the facts. Just the facts.

Linda Penney is a Philadelphia writer.