

BuffaloNews.com

Erie County

Collins feels heat as rats get thirsty

Legislators renew push on funding

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Published: July 23, 2011, 12:00 AM

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Updated: July 23, 2011, 10:43 AM

In this dry weather, rats are on the prowl.

“Rodents are looking for water more than ever,” said Michael D. Berns, Kenmore building inspector, who tracks vermin complaints that rise in the village during summer dry spells.

While that seems to indicate a need to get serious, Erie County now does less than it has in years past to help its cities, towns and villages control rodents.

This year, County Executive Chris Collins ended the popular program in which trained Health Department employees laid poisons or traps in problem areas. He maintains that no mandate requires the county to provide the service and wants to make the government leaner by not offering it.

When pressed by key county lawmakers, Collins relented and agreed in April to provide \$70,000 for a revised rodent-control program for the remainder of this year.

But now, with the county baking in hot and dry weather, rodents are hunting for the 8 ounces of water they need daily. Not a dime of the fund has been spent.

So the County Legislature has pressed Collins again.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle approved a collective statement this week calling on Collins to spend the \$70,000.

“The county executive has said this is not a state-mandated service that the county has to perform,” said Legislator Lynn M. Marinelli, D-Town of Tonawanda. “But I am saying that the residents of the County of Erie are the ones that are proclaiming this a

mandate. Rodent- abatement is high on the list of priorities for the residents, and that is what makes it an important issue.”

But even if he spends the money, Collins will not allow a return to

the old days, when county employees shouldered the rodent-control effort in a regional effort. He also is unlikely to go along with the Legislature’s additional suggestion to immediately hire two employees to control rodents.

His agreement to spend the \$70,000 had prompted talk that the county would buy rat-baiting kits to distribute to towns, villages and cities facing problems.

Then the county Health Department found that under state Department of Environmental Conservation rules it could not distribute the kits.

“We can’t buy the chemicals for someone else to use,” said Grant Loomis, Collins’ spokesman.

Only trained workers, moreover, can lay bait on someone else’s property.

So what is the county willing to do?

Loomis said the Collins administration would spend the \$70,000 helping local governments obtain the permits and DEC certification they need to set up their own programs — assuming the locality already has taken rat-control measures.

“If a municipality doesn’t have a strong property maintenance code or doesn’t even require residents to cover their garbage containers, the administration is not interested in spending county tax dollars on a losing battle,” Loomis said.

County Budget Director Gregory G. Gach said in a letter to the Legislature that local governments hoping to defray their expenses in setting up their own programs can apply to the county Health Department for some of the \$70,000.

County employees, meanwhile, will go out and investigate rodent complaints and suggest remedies to homeowners — but only as time permits. Some municipalities already have been doing this. They include Kenmore, which has received about three complaints a day in this heat wave, said Berns, the building inspector.

The village has no employee certified to lay bait. So the problem almost always falls to the property owners, he said.

“We recommend that a homeowner [lay] bait,” he said, “or call an exterminator.”