

Oh, rats! Waldwick residents say rodents have overtaken neighborhood

Sarah Nolan, Staff Writer, @sarnolan Published 12:05 p.m. ET Aug. 28, 2017 | Updated 6:00 p.m. ET Aug. 28, 2017

Residents are complaining that there's a rat problem in their neighborhood, possibly due to nearby construction. Sarah Nolan/NorthJersey.com



(Photo: Sarah Nolan/NorthJersey.com)

WALDWICK — In New York City, a rat has to tote a piece of pizza onto the subway to get noticed. But here in suburbia, just the sight of a rodent can be unexpected, and enough to cause an uproar.

Such is the case on Wanamaker Avenue, a middle-class neighborhood that residents say has recently become infested with the pests.

"They're just kind of taking over the neighborhood," said Sharon Braney.

In 31 years of living on the block, Braney's neighbor Lucy Wanklin said, she had never seen a rat. Yet in just a week and a half recently, she said she and her husband trapped and killed 33. And she suspects that's just the tip of the iceberg: "If there are 33, there are 3,000," she said.

The first signs of the rodents appeared this spring, when resident Annie Hall said she went to open her backyard shed for the first time after a long winter. There, she said, she found rat feces, along with holes in the walls and floor.

Since then, the issue has begun to tailspin, with more and more neighbors reporting sightings of the animals, both dead and alive. Some, like the Wanklins, have set up traps. Hall now outfits her shed with rat poison, yet she said she is continually patching holes gnawed by the critters.

When it comes to a culprit for this apparently sudden invasion, residents say they smell a rat in the form of the nearby construction of Waldwick Station. Russo Development and Terminal Construction Corporation began building the 111-unit apartment complex on Zazzetti Street, along the NJ Transit rail, last summer.

Carol Tyler of Tyco Animal Control, a private company that services Waldwick, said disturbance by construction could be why residents are noticing more rats — but that doesn't mean they haven't always been there.

"Whenever we as humans disturb the environment with construction or excavation, it always disturbs the animals in that area and they become more visible," she said. "I don't think we have one more rat now that wasn't there before."

Adam Pasternack, a senior vice president of property management for Russo Development, said the company has recently become aware of the complaints and has asked a pest control company to assess the situation and what needs to be done if the rats are indeed coming from their site. But Wanamaker Avenue residents say the borough also needs to do more to resolve the issue. Braney said the problem is getting worse, and she wishes the town would stop passing the buck. Gary Nicolosi, another Wanamaker Avenue resident, also said he wants to see some real effort on the part of the borough or the builder. Many on the street are gardeners and have not been able to harvest a tomato this season, he said.



Some residents of Wanamaker Avenue in Waldwick have set up traps for a rat population in the neighborhood that they say is exploding. *(Photo: Sarah Nolan/NorthJersey.com)*

The borough's health officer, Angela Musella, said an inspector has responded to several complaints on Wanamaker Avenue and provided guidance on prevention and control of rodents in the community.

The NorthWest Bergen Regional Health Commission, for which Musella works, will also conduct a rodent survey, with residents' permission, and homeowners are asked to report any unusual activity or burrows found on their property. But Musella cautioned that if there is rodent activity, residents are responsible for treating their own property.

Residents say they have been quoted between \$400 and \$500 to have their property treated by an exterminator. But they say just two or three homeowners taking action won't help — the whole neighborhood would have to do so in order for extermination efforts to be effective.

Besides the nuisance, Wanklin said she worries that pets or children will accidentally ingest rat poison that people may be using to control the rodents, or a rat might bite a child.



One Waldwick resident reported damage to her shed, which she believes was caused by rats. *(Photo: Sarah Nolan/NorthJersey.com)*

Tyler, the animal control specialist, urged residents not to panic. She said give it some time — once construction subsides, the visibility of the rats likely will as well.

“I don’t see any unnatural balances occurring right now, I just see things going on as nature goes on,” Tyler said.

Still, residents of Wanamaker Avenue would like to see action taken to send the rats packing as soon as possible.

“We’re paying \$16,000 in property taxes to live amongst rats?” said Braney. “It’s crazy.