

To: Arlington Select Board

CC: Diane Welch, APD Animal Control Officer

Hello,

I am writing to make a request about our upcoming Town Day celebration. I've attended many Town Days in my years in Arlington, and a common thread is usually a pretty constant stream of helium balloons, released by a variety of hands, usually small ones, flying into air over Massachusetts Avenue, drifting eastward on the prevailing winds. During a busy time of the day, there would be usually a steady stream, 1 or 2 in the air, at any moment.

I decided to try to take some action to ask this body, as owners and planners of the event, to try to educate booth participants that this is not a positive thing, and hopefully through that education, diminish or eliminate the potential for free release of balloons during the day. I believe that tent hosts have other options for giveaways or favors that will be received just as well or better than helium balloons.

Balloons released into the air end up back on the ground – that is a sure thing. They can take between 6 months and 4 years to degrade, even ones marketed as biodegradable. The litter can cause great environmental damage. Birds, turtles, other wildlife mistake them for food like squid, and ingesting latex can kill them – soft plastic blocks their digestive tracts. In a study, 1 in 5 seabirds that ingested a balloon fragment died from it. The strings can entangle wildlife, trapping or suffocating them. And plastics in our watershed and oceans is a problem continuing to grow.

There are situations where balloons can be managed with care – indoors, weighted as part of decorations, etc. Giving them out in high volume to children outdoors as favors is not one of them – I know because I have a vivid memory as a kid of playing with a string and losing a balloon into the air. Accidents happen, and kids won't exercise a standard of care to keep them from getting loose.

At the last full Town Day, there were only 2 booths giving them out, both of whom I will approach independently, but I am hoping that since the application asks about items like helium tanks, there is a moment to take a minute or two to make applicants aware of the downsides of giving away filled helium balloons as favors and ask them if they could perhaps make a different choice.

Thank you for your consideration.

Grant Cook
16 Wollaston Ave, Pct 16.

References:

<https://wildlife.org/balloons-play-an-outsize-role-in-seabird-deaths/>
<https://e360.yale.edu/digest/balloons-more-deadly-for-seabirds-than-any-other-kind-of-plastic>
<https://blackhills-audubon.org/up-up-and-away-with-balloons/>