

## **Of litter consequence: Threat of \$10,000 fine has little bite in Mass.**

**By Tom Benner**

Patriot Ledger State House Bureau

Ten thousand dollars for littering? Even the state's most famous litterbug, Arlo Guthrie, got off with a small fine after he and a friend dumped a half ton of garbage in Stockbridge back in 1965.

The then-young troubadour turned the experience into an anti-war anthem called "Alice's Restaurant," and it only cost him \$25.

He might pay a lot more now: 80 new signs on state highways threaten litterers with fines up to \$10,000.

The 5-by-4-foot signs, which went up last week on Route 3, replace much smaller signs that are decades old and have largely disappeared. They are part of a new anti-litter campaign by the Massachusetts Highway Department.

Guthrie, who also wrote the official state folk song, "Massachusetts," isn't necessarily opposed.

"It's good that people are taking this stuff seriously. It's a little overly dramatic, but we live in a beautiful state, and it would be nice if people were convinced that it was worth keeping it really nice," Guthrie said.

"It might be overkill, but that's fine. I don't think they're gonna fine some little old lady \$10,000 when a napkin blows out the car. It's good to have the leeway to do that, for the few idiots out of the millions of regular people who are determined to throw out bad stuff, toxic waste. I hope that's what they'll do with it."

On the books since 1985 but rarely if ever enforced, the fine is \$3,000 for a first offense and \$10,000 for repeat offenders. The law applies to all state highways, coastal areas and public lands.

It appears to be the stiffest littering fine in New England. Litterbugs in neighboring states risk fines ranging from \$10 in Connecticut to \$1,000 in New Hampshire.

"You wouldn't believe the stuff we pick up off highways," said the state's

acting highway commissioner, John Cogliano of Randolph. "Mass.Highway spends over a million dollars a year picking up litter."

Rep. Joseph C. Sullivan of Braintree, co-chairman of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, said the fine is reasonable.

"It should be \$100,000," said Sullivan. "There is nothing more damaging to the environment and aesthetically displeasing than people's trash. It's sad that we have to put up signs to remind people not to litter."

Highway Department spokesman Doug Cope says he has no clue how many people are ticketed for littering.

"We're not an enforcement agency," Cope said. "We just put the signs up."

State Police Sgt. John McNamara, who is assigned to the Norwell barracks, said he could not recall anyone being pulled over for littering. Last summer, troopers were busy trying to find highway BB gun snipers.

"I can't see anybody looking for someone who's throwing out a piece of paper," he said "You know, priorities. Hello!

"If you have a truck that's dropping things all over the place, that's what we get them for," McNamara said.

Hardly the makings of a protest song.

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## **Litterbug spins sin into song**

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"Littering," Arlo Guthrie was saying, "has been very good to me."

Remembering that he had a reporter on the other end of the phone, he quickly added, "But I wouldn't want to quote that to school children."

Guthrie has made a good living off his best-known song, "Alice's Restaurant," which is based on his first brush with the law – as a litterbug.

"Kid," the Army asks him in the song, "have you rehabilitated yourself?"

Asked the same question today, the 54-year-old singer says, "It's been exactly 36 years, 4 months, 13 days, whatever, since I had my last littering incident. It hasn't come up since. I'm definitely a reformed person."

"Alice" paid for Guthrie's home in the tiny Berkshire hamlet of Washington. Although he spends a lot of time on the road, he still keeps an eye on Massachusetts news.

In a telephone interview yesterday from Florida, where he is on tour, Guthrie said he was surprised to hear that the state has a \$10,000 fine for littering.

"It's probably a little high for a paper napkin, something that will dissolve into the cosmos on its own," he said.

"On the other hand, it's probably not too high for a nuclear-powered something or other, with somebody like a Homer Simpson bringing the stuff home."

Guthrie is also in tune with the idea of hiking state taxes if it means the money will be spent on education.

"You've got to have smart kids," Guthrie said. "In the long run, that's the most important thing. And that means not just the three Rs, but the drama and the sports and the music programs. I think that's the single most important thing we can do.

"Otherwise, you just have stupid people, and stupid people won't read the no-litter signs."