

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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This year April no Fool

The first day of April is always known as April Fool's Day, a day for practical jokes. And it always opens the second quarter of the year. But this year it will be significant in Massachusetts for another reason. It is the day the states new telemarketing law goes into effect. It is one of the little things to improve life for anyone who spends this day at home answering phone calls from unidentified strangers trying to sell things.

The legislature passed the law last year in response to consumer complaints about annoying telemarketing phone calls, and the Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation has been working since its enactment to prepare for the April start date. The law does not stop companies from using telemarketing, but it allows individuals to avoid many calls by listing their phone numbers on a Do Not Call Registry.

Signing up is a simple process you just have to pick up the phone or log onto the internet. I voted for the bill and know that it requires registration, but I only added my phone number to the list today. April seemed like it was in the distant future, but then I learned that numbers must be registered by March 1. March is only three weeks away.

If you have not registered, and if you do not want to sign up for new credit cards, phone service or any of the other favorites of telemarketers, this is the way to do it. To sign up by telephone: call 1-866-231-2255, toll-free, and follow the computerized voice instructions to list your phone number as "do not call." If you use the Internet, the process is even simpler. Go to the website, www.mass.gov/donotcall and enter your phone number on the screen.

Anyone who misses the March deadline can still sign up, but their number will not be added to the list until July. In the interest of full disclosure, I must tell you that politicians and political parties can continue to call, so election time you will still hear from us. And non-profit organizations can still call and Omaha Steaks may continue to tempt me with special offers.

I received calls over the years from individuals objecting to telemarketing calls that can come as often as several times a day, and it has concerned me that the remedies at our disposal were minimally effective. The new law, backed up by fines if companies disregard its provisions, should provide significant relief. When the phone rings and you rush from the garden or the laundry room to answer it, it should be a friend calling instead of the provider of one more credit card for your wallet. Sign up now to make it happen. And if you have any problems, I invite you to call on me.