

Backyard outlaws - Eggs fresh from the hen will get pricier if new rules take effect PROPOSED RULE CHANGES COULD BAN MANY PETS IN PENS

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Mr. Whiskers, a twitchy-nosed refugee rabbit who lives in Muldoon, is at the heart of a fight over city zoning rules.

He is not alone.

Proposed rule changes published earlier this month could apply to most non-canine pets living in backyard cages citywide, from ferrets to chickens to bunnies.

The proposed revisions to the city's Title 21 zoning code ban geese, roosters and turkeys outright and disallow backyard pets other than dogs in all mobile home parks.

On regular residential lots smaller than 10,000 square feet, the rules limit the number of small backyard animals to three.

Any pet's pen has to be 10 feet from the property line, and pet owners must buy a permit every two years at a cost of \$115, said Erika McConnell, a city planner.

The rules are an effort to find a balance -- allowing pets that don't make noise on most residential lots, but also making sure there are not too many and that there's space to insulate neighbors, she said.

Regulations are needed to deal with problem pet owners, supporters say.

Karan Nixon, who rescues bunnies, including Mr. Whiskers, says the rules aren't realistic, at least in the rabbit realm. Many people have more than three rabbits and a crackdown would only deluge Animal Control with orphaned animals, she said. Or create a whole lot of law-breakers.

There are no official statistics, but she estimates one out of every 20 families has or will have at least one pet rabbit. She knows plenty of people who have many more.

"A lot of people are living in sin as far as Title 21 is concerned," she said.

Nixon is part of the Coalition for Backyard Pets, a group headed up by urban chicken advocate Lucy Peckham, who has been circulating e-mails to fight the new rules.

Peckham has a number of complaints. First of all, the permits are unfairly expensive, she said. A license for a spayed or neutered dog is only \$39 for three years. And the setback rule will make it hard for people who live on small lots, some of whom are low-income and rely on animals, like chickens, for food, she said.

PETS BEYOND THE LAW

Existing rules for backyard pets are confusing, said Maria Martin, spokeswoman for Animal Control. But as far as Animal Control is concerned, if animals are well taken care of, aren't smelly or causing pet-poo pollution, they're fine. There's no chicken limit, but four rabbits require a permit.

There is currently a little-known, little-enforced section of Title 21 that prohibits any animal that isn't a dog -- be it chicken, rabbit, dove, pigeon, cat or ferret -- from being caged outside on the average R-1-zoned single-family residential lot, unless the pen is 100 feet from the property line. Most R-1 lots aren't that big. So, technically, most backyard pets in pens aren't legal.

Under the zoning code, Mr. Whiskers and bunnies like him are outlaws.

That rule is enforced by the zoning department, not Animal Control, but usually it doesn't come up unless neighbors complain.

Nixon thinks the city needs to be consistent across the board. A doghouse can go anywhere. Put a rabbit in it and all these regulations attach? Never mind that dogs make a lot more noise and a lot more poo than rabbits. It's not fair, she said.

And, said Peckham, why regulate some pets through Animal Control and others through zoning codes? Why not put everything in one place and make it easy to understand?

"Stores are selling people rabbits, I adopt out rabbits, other people give rabbits away," Nixon said. "A lot of people don't realize it's not legal to keep the rabbit outside. Even the stores selling hutches. Why would you sell an outdoor hutch if it's not legal?"

The city is taking public comment for possible revisions to this and other code changes in September. All the changes to Title 21 must be approved by the Assembly. For more information, visit www.muni.org.

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CITY ANIMAL RULES: For more on Title 21:

www.muni.org/planning/prj_Title21_PublicHearingDraft.cfm

Caption: Photo 2: ChickenCity1_082007.jpg Graphic 1: Rabbits001_082007.eps

BOB HALLINEN / Anchorage Daily News Lucy Peckham, holding Lila, leads the Coalition for Backyard Pets. Peckham has been circulating e-mails against the new rules. Karan Nixon keeps rabbits at her Muldoon home, including a Lionhead named Mr. Whiskers. Nixon runs a bunny rescue operation from her home, and Mr. Whiskers is up for adoption.

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