

Shelter for backyard pets shouldn't be limited to dogs - COMPASS: Other points of view

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Tuesday, July 8, 2008

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In 1998, I began keeping a small flock of hens in a tidy henhouse in my Anchorage backyard. I had checked Title 17 -- the Animal Control code -- to be sure that chickens are legal, and they are. However, my henhouse was illegal. I discovered that six years later, when one of the chicks began crowing and someone reported us to zoning law enforcement. I found a new home for the little rooster, but four years later I'm still fighting to bring my hens back.

At present, Anchorage Municipal Code prohibits structures or enclosures for any pets other than dogs in most neighborhoods. However, Title 21 (the zoning code) is in the final stage of being rewritten. On July 29, the Anchorage Assembly will hear public testimony on Chapter 5 of Title 21, including the section regulating the housing of backyard pets.

I'd like to see the Anchorage Assembly adopt a code similar to Seattle's very successful one and much like the amended code that the Planning and Zoning Commission has recommended to them for consideration. In Seattle, anyone may have three chickens on any residential lot. For every additional thousand square feet of property over the minimum lot size, one more bird is permitted. Pet houses must be 10 feet from all property lines.

This popular code has been in place since 1993, and an urban backyard pet culture has emerged. Seattle Tilth hosts an annual City Chickens Tour, very much like the garden tours in Anchorage, but folks get to visit henhouses all over Seattle. I've been on the tour twice and have seen many creative backyard structures, such as a lovely small henhouse in the middle of a rose garden with mature roses climbing it, an architect-designed henhouse with access to the nesting boxes through the hinged roof, a greenhouse divided in two by straw bales -- half for seedlings, half for the hens -- and a clever two-species design for rabbits and chickens under one roof.

Just a few generations ago, most families kept chickens for fresh eggs or an occasional Sunday dinner. The hens were a great help in the family vegetable garden, eating insect pests while fertilizing and cultivating the soil. Today, concerns about the security of food production and transportation have reawakened interest in local foods. The market for locally produced eggs, meat, fruit and vegetables is growing by leaps and bounds. Consider the expansion and popularity of summer markets here in Anchorage.

Obviously, my focus has been on chickens, but Anchorage's old zoning code adversely affects many pet owners: Anyone who has an aviary outside their house whether it be for doves, falcons, pigeons or parrots. Anyone who has a rabbit hutch, a ferret pen, a cat enclosure -- any pet that is housed or enclosed outside even temporarily, other than dogs.

If the new code is adopted, I wouldn't expect that a lot of folks will race out and get chickens. It's hard work to keep them safe, happy and healthy in Alaska, but some of us are willing to do the work, and we want our backyard pets. Anchorage should join Seattle, Portland, New York, Missoula, Ann Arbor and many other urban centers by adopting a code that allows these

backyard pets.

Plan to attend the Assembly meeting at 6 p.m. July 29 in the Assembly chambers of the Z.J. Loussac Library, 3600 Denali St.

I'll be there. I'm still fighting to bring my girls home.

Lucy Peckham is the founder and coordinator of The Coalition for Backyard Pets, an e-mail group organized to change Title 21. To find out more, go online to www.muni.org/planning/prj_Title21_PublicHearingDraft.cfm#PZCAmendments.

Caption: Photo 1: Lucy Peckham_070808.jpg

Edition: Final

Section: Nation World

Page: B7

Record Number: 1741514007/08/08

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