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## The Truth About Pit Bulls

**Some say they're violent and should be banned, while others say dogs' bad behavior is the fault of their owners.**

**By Josh Farley and Derek Sheppard, Kitsap Sun  
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Larry Steagall, Kitsap Sun

POULSBO

Cities have placed bans on them. Animal shelters often turn them away. And the mere sight of one spurs some people to call 911.

Few animals endure the stigma the American pit bull terrier does.

But how much of the controversy stems from stereotypes of the dog being violent? And how much from understanding the true nature of the breed?

Here in Kitsap, it depends on who you ask.

To Dana Lerma, development manager for the Kitsap Humane Society, pit bulls are "sweet, intelligent dogs — if someone hasn't made them horribly mean."

To Ed Stern, a Poulsbo city councilman who supports a citywide ban in the wake of a pit bull attack in April, the breed is a "snake in the public's eye" that "generate(s) fear."

The pit bull's popularity has been on the rise for decades, in part because its robust genetic build makes it an apt guard dog. Because they were bred to be "bull baiters" — or to attack bulls for sport — pit bulls do have especially strong jaws and "the potential to be aggressive," said Judy Tarabochia, operations and kennel manager at the Kitsap Humane Society.

Just as Labradors are prone to go in the water and huskies are prone to run, pit bulls have inherent tendencies. They do not have to be violent animals — and only become so when trained to be that way, she believes.

The Kitsap Humane Society's top officials see many of the fears associated with pit bulls as stereotypes. Unlike neighboring Pierce County, they've continued to operate an "open door" shelter that will take the breed into its kennel, regardless of where the dog came from, Tarabochia said.

"If we turn them away, I guarantee we'll find them down the road," she said.

There are shelters aside from Kitsap that still take them in — but the dogs don't likely stay alive for long. In some areas, bringing a pit bull to a shelter "could be a death sentence," Lerma said.

Kitsap's willingness to take in pit bulls may be a reason for heightened ownership of the breed locally. Since September 2006, the Humane Society has had 352 pit bull and pit bull mixes come through its doors. The only breed more plentiful is lab mixes.

That should not be cause for alarm, said Rance McEntyre, chief of Kitsap Animal Control, who adds that the breed's popularity is more to blame than the humane society's policy.

"The stigma of the pit bull has been taken out of context," McEntyre said. "Most pit bulls are wonderful dogs."

He will tell you the breed increases his work load.

"Because it's a pit bull, we'll get more calls."

The stigma he speaks of was strengthened recently when a 3-year-old pit bull left its yard and attacked a woman in a Poulsbo neighborhood. The dog was attempting to drag the woman back to its yard before a neighbor armed with a fireplace shovel got the dog to back off.

The attack prompted city officials to look at its policies with regard to dangerous dogs. A ban was discussed, but most officials have decided it's not the breed that's at fault, but the owner.

"The breed-specific (laws) are just fluff," interim Police Chief Jake Evans said.

Of the five Washington cities using laws that ban specific breeds, only one included enforcement into the ordinance. That city, Yakima, has been mired in a costly two-year lawsuit, Evans said.

"What we're trying to attack here is not the dog, but the actions of the dog and the owner," Evans said.

The Poulsbo Police Department looked into 50 dog laws around the country. It's crafted a new ordinance for Poulsbo that would do what other cities and the county already do — declare dogs "potentially dangerous."

"Before they bite anyone," Sgt. Howard Leeming said, "a potentially dangerous dog is a dog that may bite."

The hope is that it will put restrictions on dog owners and prevent future attacks. The city and the rest of Kitsap already has procedures in place to declare dogs "dangerous" after they've attacked someone — a process that usually leads to the dog's demise.

A potentially dangerous designation is a legal definition that comes after an investigation and judge's ruling. In Poulsbo, some of the restrictions on owners could include required training, fences or a kennel, a \$250 annual registration, surety bonds, signs and banning those dogs from dog parks.

The city's proposed law is still going through a legal review, and it's expected to come back to the City Council for a vote this summer, Mayor Kathryn Quade said.

"I think it's going to become a model," Quade said.

While the proposed law creates a "dangerous dog" designation like other Kitsap jurisdictions, it puts more restrictions on those dogs' owners.

If pit bulls, or Rottweilers or doberman pinschers are perceived as dangerous, why not ban the breeds?

"Breed-specific legislation does not stop irresponsible ownership," Leeming said. "We're trying to focus the issue on the owner."

His view is backed by Washington State Trooper Rob Richey, who trains K-9s at patrol headquarters in Shelton.

"The problem isn't breed-specific," Richey said. "It's what training is put on the dog."

Keeping specific breeds off the city's soil is fraught with other problems, too.

"It also makes me on the street become a dog expert," Richey said.

It's not an easy task, considering how many dogs are mixed in breed. How does an officer tell if a dog is 40

percent-60 percent pit bull or 60 percent-40 percent? Leeming asked. The only way to tell for sure is a DNA test.

Councilman Dale Rudolph agrees with focusing the restrictions on owners.

"It's not your right to ruin the neighborhood with a dangerous dog or a potentially dangerous dog," he said.

Stern maintains his support for a breed-specific ban, saying: "It puts the onus on the owner."

"If you throw regulations on the owner, it'll become another of a million regulations people live with, and largely ignore," Stern added.

He knows he's in the minority, and he's aware of the financial risk other cities have taken with litigation stemming from pit bull bans.

"But when it comes to the public's safety, the pocketbook must come second," Stern said.

Some residents have found their own ways to test a pit bulls' violence level against other dogs.

Keyport resident Lynne Weber decided to put to the test the temperament of dogs in a Seattle-area dog club to which she belongs.

The test simulates a walk through a neighborhood or park to gauge a dog's temperament from its aggressiveness to its shyness, according to the test's founder, the American Temperament Test Society.

What Weber found was that pit bulls in the test group "passed with flying colors." The only one to fail was a Bernese Mountain dog, typically known for its neutral temperament.

The lesson she learned?

"I don't believe there are 'bad' breeds," she said. "I believe that the individual dog ... and possibly the owner ... should be judged. Owners and their dogs shouldn't be judged wholly on the breed."

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