

Pit bull advocates balk at targeting breeds (3:22 p.m.)

Urge enforcement against aggressive behavior instead

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BOSTON – A state legislative committee that is considering a ban on pit bulls heard overwhelmingly today that it would not make sense to target certain breeds.

The vast majority of the crowd of 150 people at a Statehouse hearing applauded Rep. Bradford Hill, R-Ipswich, when he spoke on his proposal to seize dogs based on bad behavior, not on breed.

“I feel very strongly that we should not punish a dog because of its breed, but because of its actions,” Hill told the Municipalities and Regional Government Committee, adding that dogs “learn what they are taught by the humans who raise them.”

There is no specific bill on Beacon Hill to ban pit bulls or any other breed. The committee’s hearing today involved a number of bills that would toughen laws surrounding dog attacks and owner education.

However, several legislators have said they are seriously considering writing legislation to ban pit bulls or other breeds outright. Another idea is to require pit bulls to be muzzled and spayed or neutered. Legislators wanted feedback at the hearing, and they got it, mostly from pit bull owners.

No action on the legislation is expected until later this session, when a comprehensive bill on animal safety may be written.

Rep. Vincent Pedone, a Worcester Democrat who co-chairs the committee, said lawmakers were compelled to explore solutions after a series of dog attacks against children.

Pedone said it was his view that the pit bull – which had been bred to fight – has strong jaws and physical characteristics that make it more dangerous than other breeds.

“Without question, these animals are bigger, stronger and faster than other animals,” Pedone said.

However, people testified that pit bulls, properly bred and trained, were gentle. And they pointed to other breeds, like German shepherds and retrievers that ranked high in bite statistics.

“I think breed specific-legislation is odious,” said Dr. Nicholas H. Dodman, the program director of the Animal Behavior Department of Clinical Sciences at the Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine. “It’s fraught with all kinds of problems.”

Dodman said there are 25 different breeds that appear to be pit bulls, making enforcement difficult. He said limiting a ban to one breed would also leave out aggressive dogs that don’t fit the description.

“It’s very difficult to decide what actually is a pit bull...” he said. “There are always other large breeds

that are easy to confuse, and some of them may be equally dangerous.”

Dodman said pit bulls are known to be aggressive toward other animals, but non-aggressive toward people.

He said if there were legislation, it should be directed toward breeders who purposely develop aggressive dogs. Dodman said the Doberman pinscher was one example of a dog that had a bad reputation, but has since had the aggressiveness removed through good breeding.

“Rather than putting it on the dog owner, it should be put on the breeder,” Dodman said.

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