

Opposition shown to legislation proposed against 5 different breeds of dogs said to be dangerous



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(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is one in a series of three articles on dangerous dogs and the move by some Minnesota legislators to legislate against certain dangerous breeds of dogs.)

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When Kellie Dillner of Andover scooped up Marri, the pit bull showed only tenderness cradled in her owner's arms.

Tenderness might not be the behavior expected from a breed of dog proposed to be banned from Minnesota.

Rep. John Lesch, DFL-St. Paul, wants to outlaw five dog breeds from the state — Pit Bulls, Akitas, Rottweilers, Chow Chows, and wolf hybrids.

Lesch presented his proposal last summer in response to a rash of dog attacks in recent months.

“You never hear stories about rovin! g packs of Golden Retrievers attacking children,” said Lesch, speaking last summer.

Appearing with Lesch at that time was Kristina Eide, whose 5-year-old daughter Brianna Senn had been recently bitten by a pit bull in St. Paul.

“My daughter has to worry when she walks outside her house that there are other dogs that could get out and attack her,” said Eide.

Intent on pursuing legislation

Lesch is “intent” on pursuing his legislation, he recently said.

More than 100 jurisdictions across the country already have bans in effect for some dog breeds, said Lesch, an attorney.

But support for breed-ban proposal is hardly universal.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty is inclined to let local communities handle dog-related issues rather than favor a statewide approach, he recently explained.

“What happens in a densely populated area of an urban center may be different than if you have a three thousand acre farm,” said Pawlenty this month. “It’s probably an issue that’s best addressed by local units of government,” he said.

Animal control officers, too, see problems with a breed ban.

The Minnesota Animal Control Association rejected Lesch's breed ban proposal, said Bill Forbes, an association official and an animal control officer with the Bloomington Police Department.

Dog owners a factor

Dog bite statistics, Forbes argues, reflect the popularity of dog breeds. He points to dog owners themselves as a major factor in the dog bite equation. "The breeds have changed, but the people (problem owners) are still the same," Forbes said.

Troublesome dogs tend to belong to certain types of owners, Forbes argues.

These owners tend to have personal histories of violence, substance abuse, run in with the law, he explained. "It's mostly men — it's kind of a hormonal thing," said Forbes.

It's not a racial. It's not a cultural.

These problem owners are found across the socioeconomic spectrum, said Forbes.

Enforcing a statewide breed ban would be expensive and dangerous, he argued.

Animal control officers could be asking for SWAT team backup to confiscate banned breeds from defiant dog owners, he speculated.

"They're family members," Forbes said of the bond between dog owners and their dogs.

Outlawing breeds?

Dr. Margaret M. Duxbury, a veterinary behaviorist at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center, doesn't view certain dog breeds as inherently more dangerous than any other. "Do I support the idea of outlawing certain dog breeds? No," she said. "The issue is way too complicated to be solved that way," said Duxbury.

"We see dogs every week for many kinds of aggressions. And many, many, many of them are not pit bulls," she said. Several factors influence dog behavior, explained Duxbury.

Genetic temperament is one, but it strongly depends on a particular dog's own direct relatives, she explained.

Within breeds, individuals differ, she explained.

Duxbury also points to socialization as a primary influence on dog behavior.

“That starts really early — like three to twelve weeks,” she said.

“It’s important what environment the puppies are in at the breeders. If they’re isolated — in a barn or a room and they don’t hear many people — they aren’t handled very much, that puts them at a great disadvantage,” she said.

“By the time a puppy is three months, you like to see they’ve had good experience with multiple versions of whatever they’re going to experience as an adult,” she said.

Problems with proposed legislation

Dillner, Volunteer Education Coordinator for A Rotta Love Plus, an advocacy and pet adoption group focusing on rottweilers, pit bulls, and other breeds, sees many problems with the proposed dog ban legislation.

In just a practical sense, how it is possible even to identify specific breeds without genetic testing — one breed of dog often looks like another, group members argue.

And where should thousands of displaced pit bulls, rottweilers and other the breeds or types be sent if outlawed — Wisconsin? one group member quipped.

A Rotta Love Plus advocates stricter enforcement of existing dog laws. They also call for additional dog enforcement funding.

Through education, it possible to prevent people from being bitten, Dillner argues. “Absolutely — one hundred percent,” she said

A Rotta Love Plus members have been canvassing lawmakers and believe little support exists for Lesch’s breed ban legislation. “Not as it is,” said Dillner.

Dog bite testimony is powerful

But Lesch believes the testimony of dog bite victims will be powerful and compelling.

“I think they’re (A Rotta Love Plus) going to have to take their chances with that one,” Lesch of the idea of his bill lacking legs.

The Minnesota Animal Control Association is currently working on ways to give courts more ways of dealing with problem dogs.

Lesch is open to new ideas, he said.

The legislative session begins Feb. 12.

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