

Our view: Canine laws need teeth

City board proposes tightening controls for dangerous dogs

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A year ago August, a young girl in East Anchorage died after being bitten by the family pet -- a pit bull.

After that, at least one Anchorage Assembly member thought Anchorage should ban the breed to avoid future such tragedies.

Instead, the Animal Control Advisory Board, after months of research and discussions, has proposed tightening up laws regarding aggressive dogs, and increasing efforts to educate small children and their parents about what to do around dogs.

The board's research nationally found that where cities or counties passed legislation banning a specific breed, enforcement costs rose significantly and just as many people were bitten by dogs as before, said Neil Koeniger, chairman of the advisory board.

The Animal Control Board's approach is thoughtful and should help. The general theory, as stated in the board's recommendation, is to "deal with the deed, not breed."

Current city law classifies misbehaving dogs in five levels. Level 1 is the least serious offense, and Level 5 means the dog is put to death.

Here are some ways the board recommends changing the law:

- The owner of a misbehaving dog can get the dog's classification level reduced or waived by successfully completing obedience training. (This section doesn't apply to Level 5 dogs). The dog also has to have a clean record for one or two years, depending on its original offense.
- The proposal sets tougher penalties for repeat offenders in cases where a leashed dog injures a person. Under existing law, the owner faces the same consequence again and again.
- Dogs that have a record of injuring people could no longer be left in a house that's unlocked. Locking the house reduces the chances an unsuspecting party will get attacked.
- Owners would face increasing fines if they violated the rules imposed on them and their dog, such as keeping the dog confined. Currently, each violation costs the owner \$250. Under the new law, it would cost \$500 for a second violation and \$1,000 for third and subsequent ones.

Owners of animals classified at levels 2 through 4 would also have to pay an annual fee of \$100. Right now, only owners of Level 3 and Level 4 dogs pay that annual fee.

Even with the increases, Animal Control enforcement costs are not totally covered by fees and fines, said DeeAnn Fetko, contract manager with the city Health and Human Services Department. But if the Assembly approves the proposed revisions, offenders who don't follow through with the

requirements will be paying a bigger share.

Other proposed changes close technical loopholes that owners have used to fight restrictions on their dogs.

About 500 dog bites are reported in Anchorage each year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says those bites are largely preventable. Owners need to be trained to socialize and control their animals; little children or toddlers should not be left alone with them.

The changes to the law -- now up to the Assembly -- are only part of the answer.

The Animal Control Board has recommended for years that Anchorage increase enforcement staff, and it says we need to increase public education about how to behave around dogs -- especially for children and their parents.

But tightening up laws on aggressive animals is a good place to start.

BOTTOM LINE: We need to get rid of loopholes that let owners of aggressive dogs escape consequences.

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