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WESTON

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Dog attacks may affect leash laws

By Stephanie V. Siek, Globe Staff | July 24, 2005

A series of incidents involving a rare breed of dog has spurred Weston to consider the first revision of its leash law in more than a decade.

A pair of Caucasian shepherd dogs attacked four other dogs on Weston conservation land in recent months, according to complaints made to selectmen.

Town bylaws say that dogs must be under "the owner's or keeper's direct control by voice or lead" but do not explicitly require leashes.

About a dozen people appeared at a hearing Tuesday about the shepherd case, which prompted the selectmen to discuss whether the town should take a broader look at the town's leash laws. Douglas Gillespie, chairman of the selectmen, noted that changes in the regulations would require Town Meeting approval.

"In my mind, it is largely a problem of irresponsible dog owners rather than irresponsible dogs," Gillespie said.

In a letter of complaint to the board, Christine Ragone said she was walking her black Labrador retriever, Tucker, in Cat Rock Park on April 25 when the dogs -- one male and one female, and both unleashed -- ran toward her dog without provocation. The male bit his tail and tried to bring him down to the ground. He then grabbed hold of Tucker's hindquarters with his teeth and began shaking him "as if he were a rag doll," Ragone wrote.

As Tucker tried to get away, the female dog began biting Tucker's neck and shoulders. Ragone's letter was accompanied by a veterinary report that noted puncture wounds to Tucker's leg and head.

Another Labrador owner, Theresa Tucci, alleged in a letter that her dog, Archie, was attacked at the park on April 22. Tucci said Archie was bitten on the hindquarters and shaken, and was treated by a vet for multiple bite wounds.

Tuesday's hearing drew a dozen people, including Olga and Alex Shulman, who said that their dogs had also been attacked in Cat Rock Park by the pair of shepherds, once in winter and again in spring.

Olga Shulman suggested that the Caucasian shepherds be muzzled, collared, and required to pass a "canine good citizen test."

Public health director Wendy Diotalevi asked selectmen to consider limiting the number of dogs per walker at Cat Rock Park and requiring that they all be leashed.

Gillespie said the board would issue its decision as to what to do with the Caucasian shepherds in one to two weeks, and, in the meantime, their owner, Anita Mui, was ordered to keep them on a leash at all times.

The dogs, Boo-Boo and Bingo, are owned by Mui and her brother, Sarkis Najjarian, who both appeared at Tuesday's hearing.

In an interview Thursday, Najjarian denied that their pets were vicious and said he felt "ambushed" when he saw the number of people who had shown up to complain about the dogs.

"If the town thinks it's safer for the dog to be on the leash, then I support it. But we don't let them off the leash,"

Najjarian said. "We share their concern. We want the dog park to be safe for everybody. For humans, for dogs, for everyone. We're not happy to see a dog bitten by another dog."

Caucasian shepherds, also known as Caucasian Ovcharkas or mountain dogs, were bred to protect livestock in the Caucasus Mountains of Central Asia, defending sheep from wolves and thieves. During the Cold War era, they were used as military service dogs in the Soviet Union. Their long, coarse fur forms a ruff, or mane, around their neck and they have a strong, thick-set build. The females average between 100 and 120 pounds, and males weigh 140 pounds or more.

But Stacey Kubyn, a breeder in Chardon Township, Ohio, who founded the first breeding kennel for Caucasian shepherds in the United States, said that when the dogs attack another dog without provocation, it is a training problem, not a matter of breed instinct.

"We need to expose the dog to many situations from puppyhood on, so when they make decisions, they make the kind of decisions we want them to be making, and not be overreactive to the world," said Kubyn. "Even though it's a very self-minded breed, they like to be a good family member."

Kubyn said that since she and her husband, Russ, began breeding the dogs in 1990, she has seen the population in the United States increase from just a few to around 800. She is the author of a book on the breed, "Caucasian Mountain Dog: A Comprehensive Owner's Guide."

In the Central Massachusetts community of Wales, selectmen voted to declare one resident's seven Caucasian shepherds "vicious" after some of them escaped from a fenced backyard and tried to attack several neighbors, who were able to escape without injury. The breed has been banned there and in the neighboring town of Holland.

"It's a heartbreak to put in all this work and see it flushed down the toilet," Kubyn said.

"If we get breed-specific legislation [against Caucasian shepherds], we're going to lose something very beautiful in the canine world. There are not many breeds that you can have guard your house and trust with your children at the same time."

Stephanie V. Siek can be reached via e-mail at ssiek@globe.com. ■