

Poodle still vicious

By Paul M. Furfari/ Staff Writer
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Selectmen ruled Monday that a poodle with a history of three attacks in three years should continue to be officially designated as "vicious."

The board, in a 5-0 vote, agreed with Animal Control Officer Mike Leskouski's recommendation about the dog.

The animal, a male poodle owned by Irene Gravina of 19 Masardis St., has been quarantined twice since 2003. It reportedly attacked a woman walking her dog May 15.

Appearing before selectmen at their Monday meeting, Irene, Samuel Gravina and their two daughters explained the dog's behavior and pleaded for the repeal of the term "vicious."

Samuel said that since the "vicious" label had been applied to his pet that his insurance company has dropped him and that he has been unable to secure homeowner's insurance.

"There are no insurance companies that will cover us," he said.

Leskouski maintained that since the initial attack in January of 2003, he has tried to work with the family and has requested them to safeguard their property to prevent the dog from escaping and causing harm, but that the family has done little in three years to stop "Mango" from hurting the public.

Termed "vicious," a dog cannot leave a home, a "house arrest" of sorts, and it must be in an enclosure if outside. Any additional infractions of a "vicious" dog could result in the dog being euthanized.

"They assured me they were going to take this dog to training to get it fixed, they haven't yet abided by it, they haven't really done anything...," Leskouski said.

Irene stood before selectmen and read an evaluation from a trainer in Lexington that had observed the dog after the latest incident. The report said the dog was not aggressive in a series of tests, but that the dog maintains a tendency for territorial aggression near the home or in a car.

The six-year-old poodle has broken out of the family's back yard due to open gates or insufficient fencing, allegedly biting two people, and in the latest attack, circling a woman and her dog and not being able to be controlled.

In 2003, the dog bit a Waltham woman and last year a 17-year-old Dracut girl.

According to a police report, last month, the dog attacked a 55-year-old Houlton Street woman.

"She was walking her leashed dog past 19 Masardis St. when she observed a large poodle charging at her, and the poodle began snapping at her dog," the report read. After tripping and falling, the woman was on the ground and being circled by the dog. Voice commands from its owner didn't halt the behavior and the woman fled with the help of a neighbor who had been driving by. In that incident the woman and the dog were uninjured.

Samuel said that the dog had gotten out after his daughter and wife were on the opposite side of the fence. The dog is fiercely loyal to the family, Irene said, and the situation with a passing dog near her and her daughter was enough to trigger the dog's response.

After previous incidents, Leskouski requested the family increase the fence height and improve the gate to the back yard, both of those were done by the family, however, there remains a portion of the fence that is still unsuitable according to the animal control officer.

Samuel showed selectmen pictures of the back yard and pointed out the improvements he has made since the request was made. Leskouski however said the family failed to make good on promises after past attacks.

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"But they have yet to comply with any of the promises," Leskouski said. "I just don't think they are responsible enough to handle the animal."

"People are petrified of the dog, it's out of control," he said.

"The [dog trainer's] report shows we have complied up until the recent incident. We've made an attempt, it just wasn't adequate," Irene said.

She said that in every incident it was extenuating circumstances, like the presence of unusual factors, that led to the dog's acting out and that the animal didn't usually display aggressive behavior.

"There will always be an extenuating circumstance," selectman Catherine Cordes said.

"I don't think it's relevant, I don't think you can read a dog's mind," said selectmen Chairman Gordon Feltman.

"We understand that this is a serious situation and that our dog's life is at stake, but I believe we're being responsible," Irene said.

Selectmen debated delaying their decision for six months or indefinitely to see if the family could maintain promises to safeguard their home and to make good on the dog's training, but that situation eroded when discussion began to center on the town's liability for delaying the decision in the case that the dog attacks another person.

"My sense is that when you have a dog that is territorial and aggressive like that they are going to be territorial and aggressive [indefinitely]," Cordes said. "Only by confining that dog can you keep that dog in the neighborhood."

Selectmen eventually voted to deny the appeal by the family and maintain the dog's status as "vicious."

"I have not heard a thing that will let me come to a finding that is not 'vicious,'" Feltman said.

The vote came after Leskouski said he was concerned that the animal's next victim could be a child.

A previous "vicious" hearing several years ago saw a dog with similar multiple attacks have its status revoked, a time when selectmen did not go along with the recommendation of the dog officer.

The dog eventually attacked an additional person and was removed from town.


"We didn't listen to the dog officer last time and it was the wrong thing to do," selectman Sheldon Moll said.

Following the decision, selectmen expressed sympathy with the family and acknowledged the emotional situation.


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