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## Councilwoman's dogs have attacked before, neighbors say

*Attacks were sensationalized and the dogs are friendly, Shelia Wright says.*

**Ryan Slight**

News-Leader

A city councilwoman received six complaints about her dogs attacking other dogs in the past two years, city records show.

However, the health department said the first five complaints against Shelia Wright's dogs lacked evidence or had problems that would make the cases difficult to successfully prosecute.

Animal control is awaiting more information on an alleged attack on a golden retriever last week before sending the case to the city prosecutor.

Wright said her three "hunter-type" dogs are not vicious, and have behaved well when people are on her property. Her animals wear collars that shock them if they attempt to leave an "invisible fence" around her property at 1303 E. Walnut St.

The councilwoman complained that the News-Leader had "sensationalized" last week's alleged attack. She argued a "dog bites dog" story was not "front page news," and it would not have been reported if she weren't a city official.

Many people in the community expressed sympathy for her, she said.

But others, such as Jan Hyde, who lives across the street from the Wrights, don't agree.

"I felt awful when I read the article about the golden retriever being attacked," said Hyde. "Our dog has been bitten twice, and I probably should have called officials, and maybe that would have prevented this."

Hyde said she started carrying a stick and no longer walks her dog by Wright's house.

Wright was on the City Council when it made decisions regarding dog laws in recent years. She voted for the current vicious dog ordinance in 2004, but against a recent ordinance restricting pit bulls, agreeing that the type of breed wasn't the problem.

It is not uncommon for a neighborhood to have a dog owner with multiple complaints and no prosecution result, Assistant Health Director Ron Boyer said. Alleged incidents involving Wright's dogs were relatively minor compared with others, he said.

Animal control officers must see a dog running loose in order to issue a court summons, said Randy Barnts, animal control supervisor.

The Wrights have received two summonses for having a dog at large — one for Shelia Wright in April 2003 and another for her husband, Andy, in April 2005, municipal court records show. The Wrights paid a \$56 fine in 2003 and an \$84.50 fine in 2005.

Officials must have a court order to take a dog from someone's property.

"We usually save the court orders for the ones we have the most concern about," which involve attacks on people, Barnts said.

If someone has photo or video of a dog running loose that has received complaints, animal control can submit that evidence to a prosecutor, the supervisor said.

However, the person would still need to testify in court — something many people remain reluctant to do.

City Prosecutor Johnnie Burgess said the city filed 21 vicious dog cases from June 2005 through May. Most cases result in the dog's euthanasia.

Sherry Townsend, who manages apartments behind Wright's home, claimed she had two dogs attacked by Wright's dog on separate occasions.

Townsend alleged that a husky left Wright's yard and attacked her dog Jackson in January 2005 on Kickapoo Avenue. The dog was bitten, but not seriously injured, she said.

Sam, her yorkie, escaped from her apartment on May 13, 2005. Townsend said she chased after her dog and found it injured in the Wright's yard.

"I don't know if Sam got into their yard or not, because I couldn't run as fast as him, but I could hear the dogs attacking Sam," Townsend said.

"Five people from the house across the street came out and helped me get the dogs off Sam," she said.

The dog barely survived the attack, which cost Townsend \$1,100 in veterinarian bills she paid herself, she said.

Townsend voiced frustration that the city prosecutor found no evidence that Wright's dog was in violation and that the prosecutor suggested the yorkie could have provoked Wright's dog by being loose.

"Will we tell some parent that their child provoked a dog attack?" Townsend said.

Wright said she could have filed charges against Townsend for the yorkie getting on her property.

"I don't want to do that. I'm not a vindictive person," she said.

Other complaints include:

- Townsend alleged that a husky left Wright's yard and attacked a neighbor's small dog in March 2005 on Kickapoo. The dog, she said, escaped with a gash on its side, but healed without going to a vet.
- Diana Garcia, who lived behind Wright's house, said her puppy was loose on Kickapoo in November or December 2004, when a large husky came out of Wright's yard and attacked her dog. The puppy was bitten but not injured, she said.
- Garcia alleged that she saw the husky loose at her apartment complex in January 2005.
- Chris Carson claimed one of Wright's dogs left its yard and attacked his 6-month-old golden retriever on July 5. Neighbor Heather Dudley said she witnessed the attack. "I saw a malamute grab a yellow lab by his tail and try to drag him back into his yard."

But Wright said no one should be afraid of her dogs, which she said can be loud but not violent.

"People don't understand the difference between a fierce bark and a friendly bark sometimes," she said.

Wright said she and her husband have considered adding new gates. Their property is fenced except for two driveway areas.

"We've done everything humanly possible to keep the dogs in," Wright said.

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