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Oak Hill officer shoots dog

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Staff Writer

OAK HILL -- Earnhardt, a 2-year-old black Labrador retriever, faces surgery to fix a shattered foreleg after finding itself on the wrong end of a police officer's pistol.

Officer Greg Gfell shot the dog after the two faced off Wednesday afternoon while he investigated a complaint that the dog scared a resident in his Oak Hill neighborhood.

Complainant Gary Anderson said Gfell had knocked on the door at 158 Gary Ave. unsuccessfully looking for Earnhardt's owner, Thomas Belmonte, a police report states. Gfell was leaving the property when the Labrador jumped the backyard fence and charged "with its teeth barred and snarling while foaming at the mouth."

"Fearing for my safety, I drew my department-issued sidearm and fired three rounds, striking the dog twice," Gfell wrote. The second bullet grazed the back of its neck.

Oak Hill Police Chief Guy Grasso said Gfell was not available for comment Thursday. However, a review showed the shooting followed department policy. No charges are expected against Belmonte either, the chief said.

Belmonte disputes accusations his family pet, which he has had since a puppy, is dangerous.

"He has never bitten anyone and has never been aggressive toward anyone," he said.

Belmonte was not home during the shooting, arriving instead, he said, in time to see Gfell chasing Earnhardt in his side yard, apparently intent on killing the dog.

"I can't believe they reacted this way," Belmonte said.

"We are not going to get bit and then take action," Grasso said in response.

The chief put the blame on Belmonte, saying if he had properly secured the dog, the shooting would not have happened.

The 2:50 p.m. incident began while Anderson was working in his backyard, two houses west of Belmonte's.

"I was on my knees putting bricks in an entryway to a greenhouse I am building," he said. "I heard a tinkling sound."

He turned to see Earnhardt acting aggressively a short distance away.

"It came up and tried to bite me," he said.

Grabbing a rake, Anderson backed into the doorway and was eventually able to escape into his house. When he went to check the area a few moments later, Earnhardt was in his garage.

Anderson said he got his gun, but thought better of it and called 911.

Wednesday was not the first time police responded to complaints from Anderson about the dog. Grasso said his officers have gone to the house at least twice before.

"A dog like that does not belong in a neighborhood; it belongs in a junk yard," Anderson said.

However, other neighbors said they have had no problem with Belmonte's two dogs.

"They get out every once in awhile, but they get them right back in," Dick Centner said.

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