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Spotswood looks at fines for owners of vicious dogs

BY VINCENT TODARO Staff Writer

SPOTSWOOD — After a dog bit three people and another dog, officials decided it was time to revisit the borough's vicious dog ordinance.

The biting incidents occurred in 2008 and earlier this year, and the pet owner was fined by the municipal court. The dog was a Maltese, not typically considered large or frightening, and the bites were not serious, according to council President Curtis Stollen. However, the incidents were enough for the municipal court judge to declare the dog as "potentially dangerous."

The Borough Council subsequently decided to change the ordinance so that the town's laws for potentially dangerous dogs are in line with state statutes, which the judge used in his review, Stollen said. The ordinance will be up for public hearing at the council's Aug. 10 meeting.

"We had to put some language in the ordinance to use the state guidelines," Stollen said.



The new ordinance would require owners of dogs deemed potentially dangerous to register them for \$200 and pay an annual license fee of \$100. In addition, the dog must be kept on a leash of no more than 3 feet and muzzled while in public.

Stollen said the dog really only "nipped people," but officials want to err on the side of caution in such matters.

The borough already had an ordinance dealing with regular dogs and cats and the required license and fees.

"But we did not address how to deal with an animal that the courts have deemed potentially dangerous," he said "The state laws take precedence over ours, but we needed language to address the license for such a designation."

The borough was unable to issue the "potentially dangerous" dog license because it did not have the proper tags and mechanism to collect fees.

"It's not the revenue, it's the safety," Stollen said. "We want dogs controlled, not biting people. It's all about protecting people from a potentially dangerous dog. The impression must be made that you cannot let a dog out easily, and you must carefully monitor and muzzle it."

If a dog deemed potentially dangerous bites again, it will be up to the court to determine the fine. He noted that some council members could not believe the dog would be permitted to be kept by its owner if it has bitten people repeatedly. Owners of dogs deemed "dangerous" either will have to get rid of the dog or take precautions to keep the dog from biting or attacking anyone else.

Stollen said one of the people bitten by the Maltese was a police officer, so that case had to be heard outside of Spotswood. The owner was issued a summons for the incidents.

In addition to the higher registration fee, owners of such dogs must now also show they have liability insurance and have a tattoo placed on the dog's shoulder.

"Once it gets to this stage, it gets pricey," Stollen said



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