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Deeds, not breeds, now focus of bans

BACKGROUND | More cities refrain from singling out pit bulls in considering vicious-animal laws and instead weigh behavior.

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Little did Lafayette City Administrator Gary Klaphake know what awaited him when city officials this year began mulling a new vicious-animal ordinance, including a possible ban on pit bulls.

E-mails. Mountains and mountains of e-mails. From all across the country. There were so many e-mails criticizing any possible pit-bull ban that Klaphake couldn't count them all.

"As soon as you mention that you're working on a new form of a dog ordinance, you will get more e-mails than you can imagine," Klaphake said. "This is maybe a hotter subject in terms of public response than if you were raising taxes."

On Tuesday, the Lafayette City Council will vote on a strengthened vicious-animal ordinance that makes no mention of pit bulls.

Klaphake is among several metro-area leaders who have learned in recent months that dog lovers attack the possibility of a breed-specific ban. And Lafayette has peers in deciding to drop the topic altogether, though Klaphake said city officials never considered a ban much of an option.

At the beginning of this year, it looked as if pit-bull foes might see a blanket of bans against the dogs across the metro area. High-profile attacks had worsened the breed's already-dubious reputation.

After Denver's pit-bull ban was reinstated a year ago, officials in Commerce City, Aurora and Lone Tree followed suit in banning the breed, worried that Denver's cast-off pit bulls might flood their cities.

About a half dozen other cities also were pondering whether to pass a pit-bull ban. Since then, none of them has.

In Lafayette, Longmont, Lakewood, Parker and Federal Heights, the topic of a breed ban has been dismissed. Instead, most have examined the issue, heard the outcries from dog lovers and decided to strengthen their vicious-animal ordinances without singling out the pit bull.

In Jefferson County, the county government and municipalities are working together to create a comprehensive set of vicious-dog regulations that are not breed-specific.

"I think, honestly, it just comes down to people being willing to look at the facts and what the experts say as opposed to just their own fear," said Sonya Dias, who founded the group Pit Bull BAND in Denver and who had to send her own pit bull out of the city after the ban was reinstated. "Not one expert has ever said that this is effective."

Dias said better organization among breed-ban opponents has helped as well. Various animal-welfare organizations, including the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association and numerous shelters, have formed the Coalition for Living Safely With Dogs to oppose breed bans and to educate people to be better dog owners.

In Lakewood, Sonja Tweten helped organize a group to lobby City Council members against a breed ban.

"We were very worried ... that breed-specific legislation was going to go through," said Tweten, who has had her pit bull, Toby, for 12 years. "After that, our wheels kind of started turning on how we could educate and fight this thing."

Tweten gathered information on pit bulls, explaining that many of them are fine animals and some are even used in law enforcement. She and her group began trying to rally local veterinarians to the cause.

"We picked up more and more people who wanted to help," she said.

Mike Rock, the city manager in Lakewood, said officials heard from people on both sides of the pit-bull debate and, in the end, did what they felt would be most effective.

"What the council decided is that if we took a breed-specific ban off the table, it would tone down the level of emotion and rhetoric," Rock said. "And we could focus on how to deal with vicious dogs of all breeds."

Lakewood's proposed ordinance would require dog owners to register their animals. It also would impose strict regulations on owners of animals deemed vicious, ranging from requiring their dogs to be muzzled when on a walk to requiring owners to post signs reading,

"Beware, dangerous animal."

Rock is working with officials in other Jefferson County cities to make this type of ordinance uniform across the county.

Some cities, such as Federal Heights, looked at their existing animal ordinances and decided no change was needed.

"For the few number of pit bulls we have registered, we really don't have a problem," said Federal Heights City Councilwoman Carol Wright. " ... We basically decided to let sleeping dogs lie, so to speak, until such a time there is an epidemic of dog bites."

"The numbers never supported the hysteria around pit bulls," said Ben Drotar, a spokesman for the Table Mountain Animal Center, which saw its pit-bull population spike after the bans by Denver and Aurora.

When Longmont officials looked at dog bites in their city, they found that Labrador retrievers and lab mixes usually had the highest number of bites. In 2005, about 15 percent of the city's vicious-dog calls were about pit bulls and 8 percent of the bite reports involved pit bulls.

Still, there are those who remain unconvinced. The city of Arvada, for example, has not ruled out a pit-bull ban, spokeswoman Maria VanderKolk said.

"Our council's position is if it comes down to it and every area in the metro area passes a pit-bull ban, we're not going to be a dumping ground for pit bulls," she said.

But Lafayette's Klaphake said the decision to dismiss a pit-bull ban wasn't difficult for city leaders.

"It became clear to us this was all about how to manage vicious animals," he said. "Any dog can fall into it, not because of its breed but because of its behavior."

Staff writer Ann Schrader contributed to this report.

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