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Balto. Co. rejects pit bull curbs

Dog owners, activists call proposal for kennels and warning signs unfair, ineffective

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October 16, 2007

Baltimore County Council members rejected last night a measure that would have placed the region's toughest restrictions on pit bull owners, siding with dog owners who argued that singling out the breed would be unfair and likely ineffective.

By a 6-1 vote, the council killed a proposal that would have required pit bull owners to keep their dogs in concrete-based kennels and post warning signs on their lawns. The author of the proposal, Councilman Vincent J. Gardina, was the only member to vote in favor of it.

The proposal, like others across the country, met ardent criticism from dog owners and animal-rights groups, who said laws that single out breeds violate owners' rights and prove costly, while failing to prevent pit bull attacks. Dozens of people stood outside the building that houses the council's chambers last night, holding signs that read "Breed Specific Legislation Is Unconstitutional" and "Pit Bulls Are Not Bad News."

"It's not just pit bulls that can do damage, it's dangerous animals," said Council Chairman Stephen G. Samuel Moxley, a Catonsville Democrat. He said he will work with administration officials to strengthen restrictions on animals with violent histories. He joined five other council members who introduced a bill last night to increase the fines for failing to register a dog with the county from \$25 to \$100.

Gardina's bill followed proposals in other jurisdictions - including a proposed ban in Baltimore City in 2001 - that have either failed or been overturned.

"When we go and pass laws based on breed, you're not correcting the situation," Marcy Setter, education director for the Internet-based Pit Bull Rescue Central, said in an interview before last night's vote. " ... Attacks still happen. ... Name me a dog breed and I'm going to tell you it's been involved in a fatal attack."

Gardina introduced the legislation in response to the mauling in April of a 10-year-old Towson boy who spent more than two weeks in the hospital recovering from his injuries.

Gardina and other proponents of pit bull legislation pointed to reports showing that pit bulls are responsible for an inordinate number of attacks. A report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed they were responsible for more dog bite-related attacks than any other breed.

The bill would have required owners to keep the dogs in a cage with a concrete base, muzzle them outside the cages and post property signs that read "Pit Bull Dog" or "Beware of Dog." Violators would have faced a fine of up to \$1,000.

Before the night vote, Gardina introduced an amendment, which was passed by the council, to remove the requirement for the dogs to be muzzled.

"I don't have any cases that I'm aware of where a dog attacked another dog or person while he was on a leash," Gardina, a Towson-Perry Hall Democrat, said in an interview before the meeting. "It was all cases where the dog got out of the yard. If that's the case, the kennel should take care of that."

Council members who opposed the bill, as well as the county's health officer, questioned the county's ability to enforce the proposal, saying the county's half-dozen animal control officers were stretched thin.

Setter said that her group hears weekly about a proposal targeting pit bulls.

"More and more often now, we are finding that legislators are open to education," Setter said. "We find that one legislator or whatever will do this knee-jerk reaction based on an incident, and we're able to get in and educate people with the facts."

In 2001, the Baltimore City Council narrowly rejected a proposed ban on pit bulls after the city's health commissioner said the city lacked resources to enforce it. Similar efforts by a local lawmaker in Washington have failed repeatedly over the years. Other jurisdictions have overturned bans.

Also last night, the council unanimously approved the spending of more than \$20 million in public money toward a new parking garage in Towson.

The 630-space parking garage would be part of the Towson Circle III development, which would also include a 14-screen, stadium-style movie theater, restaurants and shops. The project, a joint development by Heritage Properties and the Cordish Co., is scheduled to be complete in January 2011.

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