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Pit bull ban barks up wrong tree

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It's a horrifying event that happens every few months in the United States: Pit bull kills child.

In response, more communities are banning pit bull dogs. But the campaign to prohibit pit bulls is based far more on emotion than on reason. That is why banning pit bulls has generally failed to make the public any safer from dog attacks and has led to ugly consequences, including incidents of authorities taking a devoted pet from a tearful owner merely because the dog looks like a pit bull.

Madison and other Wisconsin communities should steer clear of pit bull bans. A more effective way to protect the public is to aggressively enforce dangerous dog ordinances and to educate dog owners about their risks and responsibilities.

The clamor for pit bull bans has been growing worldwide for several years. It passed a milestone last month when Canada's most populous province, Ontario, banned the dogs, effective next month. Ontario becomes the first North American province or state to impose a pit bull ban.

Rio de Janeiro banned pit bulls from public places earlier this month. San Francisco, Oklahoma and Georgia are among U.S. jurisdictions considering bans, and, as reported in Thursday's State Journal, Denver is cracking down on its pit bull prohibition after a court upheld the ban.

If past is prologue, none of the bans will have the desired effect. The United Kingdom has prohibited the sale and breeding of pit bulls since 1991 with no impact on the number of dog attacks.

Underlying the campaign to ban pit bulls is the notion that the breed is inherently vicious because pit bulls were originally bred as fighting dogs. That genetic premise is flawed and has failed to stand up in several court cases, including a 2002 Alabama Supreme Court ruling.

To be sure, pit bulls can be dangerous. After all, a bite from a Chihuahua is one thing; a bite from a pit bull is something else entirely. Pit bulls are No. 1 among breeds in fatal attacks against humans. But other breeds can be dangerous, too. A six-year study, published in the medical journal "Pediatrics," found that Rottweilers and German shepherds, when combined, accounted for more fatal attacks than pit bulls. Many studies have demonstrated that a dog's viciousness has more to do with the

care the dog receives than with what breed it is. As the "Pediatrics" study concluded: "Most of the factors contributing to dog bites are related to the level of responsibility exercised by dog owners."

Moreover, data on pit bull attacks are suspect because definitions of "pit bull" vary. The term "pit bull" properly applies to three breeds: The American pit bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier and the Staffordshire bull terrier. But in common usage a variety of stout dogs with strong jaws are referred to as pit bulls. Consequently, attacks by other breeds are often blamed on pit bulls, and authorities have difficulty distinguishing pit bulls from other dogs.

Further weakening the argument for pit bull bans is the fact that fatal attacks by pit bulls or any other breed are rare. The total number of deaths attributed to dog attacks nationwide is usually 15 to 20 per year, reaching 21 in 2004. The number attributed to pit bulls annually is four to five.

Injuries from dog bites are a much larger problem, approaching 1 million per year, with thousands involving serious wounds. The size of the dog bite problem, which cuts across many breeds, puts the pit bull ban campaign in perspective: Banning pit bulls is not only unwarranted, it's also inadequate. Needed is better enforcement of dangerous dog ordinances against all breeds and more education to encourage responsible dog ownership.

Dangerous dog ordinances, like Madison's, put the focus where it should be on a dog's behavior rather than its breed. Madison's ordinance grants authorities the power to declare any dog dangerous based on its behavior. The dog's owner has the right to appeal. If the dog is finally determined to be dangerous, it can be impounded, removed or destroyed.

Pit bulls are inappropriate for many pet owners because, by their nature, the dogs require extraordinary training and attention. But the evidence shows that outlawing the breed is the wrong solution to the much broader problem of dog attacks.

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