

Animal welfare proposals draw fire

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LAS CRUCES - A number of animal welfare advocates contended this week that proposed revisions to Las Cruces and Doña Ana County animal control rules don't go far enough to protect pets and reduce overpopulation.

But others involved in the debate said the proposal is the most workable compromise among a spectrum of divergent views and is a step in the right direction.

Some advocates criticized the proposal because it doesn't contain a trap-neuter-release provision, allowing feral cats to be released back into the open once they've been caught and sterilized.

"Trap, neuter and release should be part of our efforts to reduce the cat population," said animal rescue operator Bill Hart, while expressing a number of concerns to animal officials in a Thursday public meeting.

Currently, there's no such ordinance on the books, either in the city or county, though a feral cat program is run on the campus of New Mexico State University. City-county animal shelter Director Beth Vesco-Mock has spoken in favor of the measure, saying its needed to put a dent in the numbers of cats being euthanized at the facility.

But opponents of a trap-and-neuter provision have argued it puts wildlife, especially birds, at risk by condoning free-roaming cats. Some have questioned the effectiveness of the programs in other places around the country.

The trap-neuter-release idea was a point of debate among the advisory panel that drafted the proposed animal rules, said Robert Hoffman, a sporting dog owner and trainer who chaired the group. He said a program in Jacksonville, Fla., has seen some decrease in cat euthanasias, but it's not dramatic.

"It's not the panacea that proponents would have you believe, if you look at the numbers that are available," he said, noting that's his personal view and not necessarily the entire panel's.

Ultimately, the trap-neuter-release provision didn't get enough votes among advisory panel members to be included, Hoffman said.

Doña Ana County had been crafting a trap-neuter-release ordinance independently last year, but it was shelved, after elected officials opted for a larger-scale revision of all pet ordinances.

County Spokesman Jess Williams emphasized that the most recent revision is a proposal only at this point. A number of further steps are required, including eventual public hearings before the city council and the county commission, before anything is final, he said.

"People keep looking at this document like it's a new law, but this document is just a beginning," said Williams, also a member of the shelter's governing board. "It's not insignificant at all, but it's also not tying anyone's hands."

Chaining

Other critics have objected to the proposed ordinance because it would allow for chaining or tethering an animal all day outdoors. Among other parameters, the tether would be a metal chain or plastic-coated cable between eight and 12 feet long and have swivels at both ends.

Now, the city of Las Cruces ordinance allows for a tether of at least 12 feet to be used, unless the animal could reach past the boundaries of the property with that length, according to the city ordinance. There's no time limit, and no other conditions are specified.

In the county, a chain at least 12 feet in length is authorized, but if that would allow an animal to leave the property, 8 feet is permitted, said Lt. Joe Jacquez, supervisor for Doña Ana County's animal control and codes department. Swivels are required, and there's an eight-hour limit on the amount of time a pet can be continuously chained, he said.

Jacquez, who took part in the drafting of the revisions, said the eight-hour time limit was impossible to enforce. Anyone cited in court could argue that the animal control officer hadn't kept watch for eight hours to know whether an animal had been chained or not.

"We weren't able to say we were there the entire time, so we took that out," he said.

More than one-third of dogs in the city and county are kept on chains, Hoffman said, so scrapping the chaining ordinance would be impractical. The panel noted in its proposal that tethering is discouraged. However, Hoffman said, the idea was that, if it's going to take place, there should be more-stringent guidelines.

"You have to do it in a way so the animal is not suffering in any way, shape or form," he said.

Attendee and resident Nate Cote, a former state representative, said he used to encounter tethered dogs at every turn while campaigning door-to-door on the East Mesa and in Chaparral. He described the practice as "a real problem."

"You can change these ordinances, but it's really hard to change these attitudes toward caring for animals," he said.

Maryln Zahler, a member of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, spoke out against chaining dogs and the provision in the recent proposal. Rather, Zahler said, the provision should be dropped and animal groups should step in to help residents build pens.

"There are definite problems," Zahler said.

Several attendees at Thursday's meeting, held at City Hall, said they thought the proposed revisions were a step backward.

Hoffman said his group included diverse members who recognized that they'd have to compromise to reach a proposal.

"The committee did an extraordinary job putting together a set of ordinances that works for this area of the country and keeps our animals happy and safe and well-cared for," he said.

One advantage with the new proposal is that city and county rules would be much more closely aligned, if the measure is passed, Jacquez said.

Regardless of which revisions actually are approved, Vesco-Mock said, improvements to the pet problems in the community are going to take a shift in public mindset.

"Just telling people what they have to do isn't the solution," she said.

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