

City wants more teeth in vicious dog ordinance

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By Clare Walters, The Star

Chicago Heights officials are working to stiffen the city's vicious dog ordinance after police documented at least four dog bites during the past four weeks.

City corporation counsel Thomas "TJ" Somer last week distributed a few versions of dangerous dog legislation to the city's aldermen for review.

Somer said he's reviewing several different ordinances to draft a city version that is comprehensive and focuses on prevention instead of punishment.

Residents called the city's attention to what some consider a growing vicious dog problem. The outcry came after a pit bull attacked and killed a Yorkshire terrier and bit a man July 23 in the 200 block of West Raye Drive.

Police since have reported at least three more problems with dogs across the city.

According to a police report, a mail carrier witnessed two pit bulls attacking a small white dog Aug. 16 in the 200 block of West 17th Street.

Police captured the pit bulls and took the injured dog to the Park Forest Animal Hospital.

On Aug. 22, a mixed breed dog bit but did not break the skin of a woman entering an apartment in the 1800 block of Euclid, according to a police report.

A day later in the 200 block of Roberta Lane, police said a pit bull bit a Brittany spaniel on the leg.

In the last two cases, police cited the dog owners for failing to obtain proper licensing and vaccinations for their dogs, police said.

The city's ordinance defines vicious dogs as those that have or have attempted to bite or attack a person or other dog. The ordinance prohibits vicious dogs citywide.

Police can temporarily impound vicious dogs, but city code does not include a provision to euthanize them.

Somer said he has spoken with a dangerous dog expert from the Humane Society of the United States to help the city write a new ordinance.

According to a model of dangerous dog legislation from the Humane Society, after officials declare dogs to be dangerous, they may be humanely euthanized if owners fail to comply with provisions.

Provisions could include the spaying or neutering of the dog, implantation of a microchip with owner information and placing the dog into a behavior program.

The model ordinance also would require the handling of dogs by a "responsible person," meaning someone older than 18 years of age who is able to keep a dog under control.

In the July attack on the Yorkshire terrier, an 11-year-old boy was walking the full-grown pit bull.

The terrier's owner said the boy did not have control over the dog.

Somer said the city also will consider an inverted licensing fee strategy.

For example, he said, the city could start the licensing fee at \$1,000.

As a dog's owner takes measures to reduce potential problems, such as proving the dog has been neutered, verifying vaccinations and showing the owner's yard has proper fencing, the fee will become lower proportionately, Somer said.

"It's the only theory I've seen so far that goes toward prevention instead of punishment," he said.

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