

Published on Monday, March 19, 2007

Leash likely to tighten on pit bulls  
By ERIN SNELGROVE  
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Every week, Yakima animal control officer Ben Zigan gets five or six complaints about pit bulls.

And every week, he tracks them down and issues 48-hour warnings to remove the dogs from within the city of Yakima.

Too often, however, owners hide or move the dogs elsewhere in the city.

"People know the law but chose not to follow it," Zigan said.

On Tuesday, the Yakima City Council will consider a tougher law that abolishes the 48-hour notification rule, allowing animal control officers to immediately seize the dogs and tag them with identification microchips. This would help identify problem pit bulls, exposing their owners to fines, charges and even the confiscation of their pets.

"All it takes is one person to get attacked and somebody getting sued, and it kind of goes downhill from there," Councilman Micah Cawley said.

Pit bulls have been prohibited in Yakima since 1987, after several serious dog attacks. The need for the law was strengthened in 1996, after two pit bulls killed a 75-year-old man in a wheelchair outside city limits.

And it was modified to expand the definition of a pit bull in 2005, after two pit bulls attacked a 15-year-old Yakima boy.

Under the current 48-hour-notification rule, Zigan said dog owners often hide their dogs or move them elsewhere in Yakima. And since the dogs aren't tagged on the first offense -- unless they're caught running around -- proving their identity can be difficult when found again.

Under the new rule, owners could still get their dogs back by paying a kenneling and tagging fee at the Humane Society Shelter. But the next time their dogs are caught, Zigan said they'd likely have to go to court keep them.

"I'm hoping people will get smart and not bring their dogs into the city," Zigan said. "It saves us the work from having to impound them."

Although he doesn't keep track of the number of pit bull attacks in Yakima, he said it's rare.

Also rare is imposing the maximum penalty of one year in jail and a \$5,000 fine. The city's legal department couldn't say what a typical punishment entails.

The Humane Society does not keep track on impounds by breed, making the number of pit bull impounds difficult to determine.

Admittedly, Zigan said pit bulls are often given a bad rap, adding that owners have a lot to do with how the animals behave.

"Any dog will bite," he said. "It's about proper ownership. Pit bull terriers require more socializing than border collies."

Still, Councilwoman Susan Whitman said the law is designed with the public's safety in mind, and it needs to be obeyed.

"We know of people who have pit bulls," she said. "We need to remove them from the city limits."

### **Defining a pit bull**

Pit bulls refer to such breeds as the American pit bull terrier and the American Staffordshire terrier. The dogs are characterized by their solid, muscular build, short coat and broad, flat head. They have deep, wide muzzles, high-set ears and short tails.

The city considers any dog with classic pit bull characteristics to fall under its ordinances.

Other breeds, such as boxers, share some of the same attributes of pit bulls.

That's taken into consideration by animal control officers. But owners must typically show paperwork to prove their dogs aren't pit bulls.