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# Proposed dog rules single out pit bulls

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The city of Wichita is proposing new controls aimed at dangerous dogs, and they would be applied specifically to pit bulls.

A key change would allow for any dog to be deemed dangerous because of aggressive behavior -- before it bites someone. Current law essentially gives dogs "one free bite" before the matter goes to a hearing, said Kay Johnson, the city's environmental services director.

Part of the impetus for the proposals was a case last year in which the city removed 68 pit bulls from a home. "We did not want that situation to happen under our nose again," she said Wednesday.

The proposed regulations will be shared with the community over the next two months to gain feedback before the City Council considers any action, Johnson said.

Some changes would apply specifically to pit bulls: Convicted felons couldn't own pit bulls -- or any dog found to be dangerous -- and no one could have more than two pit bulls. Now, someone can own up to four dogs if they obtain a permit.

Also, pit bulls would have to be spayed or neutered, unless the owner obtains a breeder's license, and the animals would have to have microchips embedded in them so they could be traced to owners.

"Quite often, people that are conducting illegal activities use pit bulls to guard their premises or to warn them or to do harm to people who are trying to investigate, and we don't want that happening in our community," Johnson said.

"We don't want pit bulls used as a weapon."

Utility workers and postal carriers often encounter such situations, she said.

Wichita dog-grooming shop owner Jim Halsig said the proposals appear to be unfair to responsible pit bull owners.

But Linda Crockett, who said her family has been terrorized by pit bulls running loose, said such regulations should have been in place already.

Their views reflect some of the differences in a national debate about whether pit bulls are inherently dangerous.

"We're not saying that people can't raise pit bulls," Johnson said. "We're trying to be very sensitive to the pit bull owner that's a law-abiding citizen, that takes care of their dog."

But pit bulls pose a disproportionate problem in Wichita, Johnson said. Of 5,400 dogs housed in a shelter by the city last year, almost 1,500 were pit bulls. And 17 of 23 dogs shot by Wichita police last year were pit bulls.

## Targeting aggression

One change under consideration would let a health officer deem that a dog is dangerous if he finds it acts aggressively.

"What we're looking at is an animal that constantly gets out, that bares their teeth" and intimidates people,

Johnson said. It's not aimed at dogs that occasionally bark or defend against an intruder, she said.

Each case would go to a hearing.

Already, under current law, if a hearing results in a dangerous-dog ruling, the owner is required to buy special insurance.

Of more than 800 animal bites reported to her office last year, Johnson said, about 600 were by dogs. The number is declining, she said, "but that's still not good."

### **Breeders' permits**

For the first time, the city would require anyone who allows more than one litter of puppies a year to get a breeder's license. This would apply to all kinds of dogs, not only pit bulls. The proposed charge would be \$150 annually, but Johnson expects opposition to it.

"The real purpose is... to make sure that they're taking care of the animals, that they're breeding them and they're living in healthy conditions, and they're doing it in an area that's zoned for that," Johnson said.

### **Different reaction**

Halsig thinks the pit bull limits wouldn't be fair or effective. "I think generally breed-specific kinds of legislation like that don't really work," said Halsig, who owns a grooming and pet products store called Bed & Biscuit Pet Center.

It's not fair to punish responsible pit bull owners because others raise fighting dogs, Halsig said. His shop serves a number of well-loved pit bulls -- "they're good animals," he said.

The real problem, he said, is a shortage of animal control officers and a lack of education on the need for spaying and neutering pets.

One person who would welcome pit bull regulations is Crockett, who lives near 39th North and Litchfield, in northwest Wichita. Crockett said a neighbor still has one pit bull after a police officer shot a second pit bull when it charged at him in 2005 after threatening another neighbor.

Before that, she said, relatives who live with her had to rush into their car to escape one of the dogs.

The dogs were getting out of a fence, she said.

"It's really kind of nonsensical that you can't walk out of your house or to your car without looking for a dog."

Crockett, 58, said she still fears that the remaining pit bull could get loose and charge someone, "because I know that dog is dangerous. I am still very fearful for the children, not only my children but all the children in the neighborhood."

She has small grandchildren living with her.

Crockett said she has to use a wheelchair ramp outside her house, "which leaves me an open target. There is no way I can fight off a charging pit bull, not possible."

So, she said, "I love the idea" of the regulations.

"This should've happened sooner," she said. "Because we are all taxpayers, we all have rights, and I've never seen it fair that these dog owners intimidate us; I am intimidated by those dogs."