

# Insurance, muzzles and registration among terms to own 'dangerous dogs'

Sikeston 'Pit Bull' ordinance

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SIKESTON — If you think a pit bull is a great dog to have, keep in mind: with that great dog comes great responsibility when living in Sikeston.

"We have very strict guidelines concerning pit bulls," said Trey Hardy, community redevelopment coordinator.

Sikeston has had a dangerous dogs ordinance in effect since 2003. Among the reasons the animal control ordinance was amended to include these provisions was citizen concerns about pit bulls.

"Most of our dog calls are on pit bulls," confirmed Tom Burns, code enforcement officer.

"I have had phone calls from concerned citizens almost at the point of tears because of their fear and concern about pit bulls in their neighborhoods," Hardy said.

Burns summarized the main points of the requirements for keeping a pit bull in Sikeston:

- If the dog is kept outside, it must be in a pen with a secure top and bottom and with a locked gate. "'Beware of dog' signs have to be up," Burns said.
- If the dog is out of its pen, it must be wearing a muzzle and be on a four- foot leash but be under the control of an adult.
- "And the dog must be registered with the city," Burns said. Requirements for the registration include a picture of the dog, shot records, and proof of insurance on the animal. "You've got to have insurance on the dog," Burns said.

While many pit bull owners like to claim their dog is completely docile and has never displayed aggressive behavior, experiences by code enforcement officers indicate docile behavior in the past doesn't mean the animal won't become aggressive unexpectedly.

"The bad thing about pit bulls is, when it's going to bite, it doesn't give any expression," Burns said. "A pit bull will look at you and the next thing you know, he's on you. They bite

without warning.”

“Just the other day, we were at a residence trying to get a pit bull,” recalled Jamie Williams, code enforcement officer. “The dog was wagging its tail and it sniffed my hand. From most dogs, this is an indication that ‘You can pet me.’ But not with this pit bull. If my reaction time wouldn’t have been great, it would have bitten me.”

“And the dog’s owner said, ‘That dog has never done that before,’” said Amy Smith, code enforcement officer.

Hardy said the city’s dangerous dogs ordinance defines pit bulls as being of the following breeds: Bull Terrier; Staffordshire Bull Terrier; American Pit Bull Terrier; American Staffordshire Bull Terrier; “and any mix of the above.”

Burns added that if the dog appears to be a pit bull, by city ordinance, “it is treated as such.”

Williams noted there is also a list of criteria by which any dog, regardless of breed, can fall under the city’s definition of a dangerous dog.

A dog may be designated as dangerous by the city if:

- There are records of it biting hard enough to break the skin without provocation;
- It has ever killed another domestic animal without provocation while off the owner’s property;
- It is a dog used for fighting or trained to fight;
- It is used primarily to guard property, unless it is owned by a governmental or law enforcement agency;
- It has a known propensity, tendency or disposition to attack unprovoked;
- If it chases or approaches in a menacing fashion or with an attack attitude when provoked;
- If it has three separate instances of being unrestrained or uncontrolled off the owner’s premises within a one-year period.

Hardy said this section applies to all breeds “from Chihuahuas to Yorkies to Great Danes.”

Behaviors listed under the dangerous dog definition may be observed by code enforcement officers or substantiated by documentation, he added.

City officials noted reports of loose dogs after normal business hours are investigated by police officers. If the officer decides it is a dangerous situation, then the animal control officer on call is summoned.

The majority of these calls, they noted, are related to pit bulls.

Code enforcement officers said they sometimes hear complaints from people who think they are being inhumane when they use a catchpole to control an animal as they load it into a transport.

Hardy said this method is, however, the recognized national standard for controlling animals and was developed to ensure the safety of animal control officers.