

Do pit bulls need a law of their own?

Idea of breed-specific measure stirs fierce debate

By Raja Mishra, Globe Staff | May 3, 2007

Lawmakers are exploring whether to push for a statewide ban on pit bulls, with some urban legislators saying Massachusetts needs to overhaul dog-control laws to reduce attacks by combative canines.

The effort is the latest attempt to rein in perhaps the most controversial breed of dog, one that has become synonymous with urban dysfunction but is beloved by thousands of pet owners.

In the past two months, pit bulls attacked Lynn police officers and mauled a 10-year-old boy in Taunton. Numerous Massachusetts towns have passed an array of local measures, with Canton legislators passing tough regulations this week limiting pit bull ownership.

Animal rights advocates and some lawmakers said they oppose banning pit bulls or any other breed, arguing that regulations should target careless and malicious dog owners, rather than their pets.

"It so happens that pit bulls are the breed favored by those who like to raise dangerous dogs, but they're also great family pets," said Scott Giacoppo, deputy director of advocacy for the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Lawmakers on the Joint Committee on Municipalities and Regional Government, which will hold a hearing May 14 on potential new dog-control laws, were divided yesterday on banning pit bulls statewide. But several other proposals under consideration appear to have more support: providing guidelines for cities and towns to banish troublesome dogs; mandating license requirements for certain breeds; requiring training for owners of certain breeds; fining owners of noisy dogs; and seeking stricter leash laws.

Word of a possible pit bull ban, which leaked earlier this week, has drawn considerable backlash from dog owners, veterinarians, and animal rights activists, who have flooded lawmakers with protests. At the heart of the issue is whether pit bulls -- several breeds of dog that include American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, or Staffordshire bull terriers -- are inherently dangerous.

The dogs were first bred in 17th-century England by crossing terriers and bulldogs and were often used in dog fights because of their strength. They were brought to the United States in the 1800s by Irish immigrants coming to Boston, then subjected to further breeding that gave rise to the American versions.

Pit bull incidents became so frequent in Boston that in 2004 city officials passed expansive regulations requiring all pit bulls to be spayed or neutered and to be muzzled in public. Owners in the city are required to display warning signs outside their homes.

"The number of pit bull attacks raises concerns," said Representative Vincent A. Pedone, Democrat of Worcester, who has informally discussed a ban with committee members. "These dogs are kept specifically for fighting or as weapons, and I don't think they have any place in civilized society."

He rejected arguments that dog owners are more to blame for problem animals.

"That's the same argument that opponents of restrictive gun laws give us: It's the person, not the gun," he said.

"But the fact of the matter is that if you reduce the availability of a weapon, whether it's a pit bull or gun, you reduce the number of incidents."

In 2000, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention studied 238 fatal US dog attacks over two decades and found that more than half were caused by pit bulls or Rottweilers. But the study also found that 82 percent of the attacks involved unrestrained dogs, and the authors cautioned against broad conclusions about the nature of pit bulls.

The committee's chairman, Senator James E. Timilty, a Walpole Democrat, said he would oppose any ban, suggesting it will have a difficult time passing.

"I'm against any kind of breed-specific legislation," he said. "I think it's unfair to responsible dog owners. You start with pit bulls and are going after German shepherds next."

No US states have banned pit bulls. Several cities and municipalities have, most notably Denver and Prince George's County, Md

Giacoppo of the MSPCA said a pit bull ban would not work, because owners who train their dogs to be aggressive would not comply with it.

On Monday, Canton's Board of Selectmen passed an ordinance limiting households to one pit bull, which must be spayed or neutered and kept in an enclosed area. The move was prompted by one family's dogs that roamed the neighborhood.

"We had the dogs picked up, we fined them, but still it kept happening," said Avril T. Elkort, a member of the Canton Board of Selectmen. "We had no other option. They were terrorizing the children."

As with many animal-related issues, the debate has become emotional. Timilty said he grew up with a large and somewhat aggressive Hungarian sheepdog named Kiraly. "We adored the dog," he said, "so I guess I'm sensitive about the issue." ■