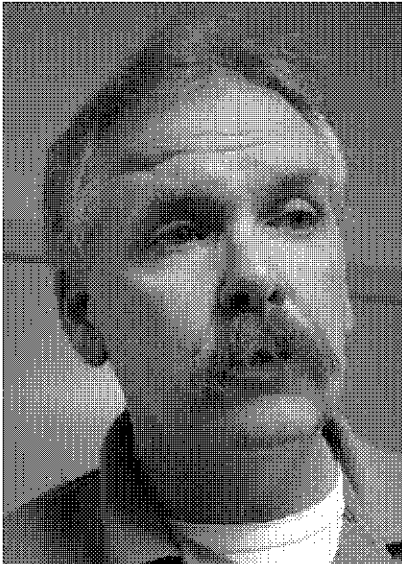


Neighbors fearful after two attacks by pit bulls

Animal Control chief says his hands are tied



FORTNER

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FRANKLIN — The recent deaths of two family pets at the teeth of pit bulls in a Franklin neighborhood again raise the question of how much responsibility a pet owner must take for an animal's actions.

According to Williamson County Animal Control Director Tony Fortner, state laws leave his agency with limited options for dealing with vicious animals such as the ones that killed a mopey old bassett hound earlier this week and a beloved Rottweiler last month, both in the Cadet neighborhood near Roper's Knob.

"About the only thing we can do is charge people with having their dogs at-large," Fortner said. "Unfortunately, there is no vicious- or dangerous-dog law in Tennessee."

The neighborhood where the attacks occurred, across the street from Liberty Elementary School, has seen a rise in the number of residents keeping pit bulls as pets, Fortner said.

"It's a problem that started picking up a few years ago, but we've always had issues out there with dangerous dogs," he said. "We do patrols daily through that neighborhood, looking for them."

Melissa Kidd's 10-year-old Rottweiler named Buzz was killed in April by a pit bull that lived one street over from her Arsenal Court home. Kidd said she sees people walking pit bulls in the neighborhood frequently and believes those owners should be required to adhere to special requirements.

"I feel that they should be able to own them, but if they do, they should have strict rules on these dogs, something like having certain strong fences or other restraints," Kidd said. "If they're not responsible enough to handle pit bulls, they shouldn't be allowed to have them."

The owner of the pit bull that killed Kidd's dog has agreed to pay for Buzz's emergency veterinary bills, burial and his value.

Children may be at risk

Kidd's greater concern, however, is the danger that pit bulls pose to her children, ages 14, 8 and 16 months.

Cadet Lane neighbor Carolyn Marlin, whose bassett Elvis was killed by a pit bull on Monday, has the same worries.

"My 1-year-old grandbaby was in the front yard when it happened. What if that had been her instead of Elvis?" Marlin said. "This neighborhood is full of kids, and it's also getting to be known for pit bulls. That just scares me to death."

The pit bull that killed Elvis was picked up by Animal Control after the attack, and the owner has

Proposed dog laws

Sen. Doug Jackson's proposed legislation for beefing up the state's dog laws would do the following:

- Increase punishment for the offense of owning a dog running at large and provide staggered punishments for such offenses depending upon the amount of damage or injury caused.
- Enhance the punishment for the offense of a dog running at large if the dog was trained to fight, attack or kill, had a prior history of biting people, or if the owner knew of the dangerous nature of the dog.
- Impose liability upon the owner of a dog that causes injury to another regardless of whether the dog had any past propensity for viciousness or whether the owner had knowledge of the dog's viciousness.
- Increase the punishment for the offense of being present as a spectator at a dog fight from a Class C misdemeanor to a Class A misdemeanor.

Source:
www.dogbitelaw.com

yet to come forward. Fortner said the animal likely will be euthanized.

"If we had an owner in this case, we could get him into court and charge him," Fortner said. "At that point, it would be up to a judge to assist in what we need to do. He or she could declare that the pet be euthanized or impose a fine. When we can have the option, the court system usually works really well for us."

Tougher law sought

Animal Control's lack of recourse for handling the problem efficiently could be remedied if dog-related legislation sponsored by state Sen. Doug Jackson is passed. Three of Jackson's four bills, which would increase dog owners' accountability and responsibility, already have passed in the Senate. Jackson said he is optimistic of the same outcome in the House by the end of the legislative session.

"The current law in Tennessee goes all the way back to the 1600s," Jackson said. "It's actually England's first-bite rule, which prevents anything from being done to an owner unless their dog has previously bitten someone else."

Jackson's legislation would eliminate that first-bite requirement and carry amplified penalties for owners of certain breeds of dogs, dogs-at-large or facilitators of dog fights. He acknowledges that some people are resistant to the notion of enhanced dog laws.

"There are so many dog owners out there, and placing new responsibilities on people can create opposition," Jackson said. "But the fact is, making pet owners be more accountable and responsible are the only ways to keep people safe. Any one of us or our children could be a victim, and that's why this is so important."

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