

Take a bite out of negligent owners: Make them responsible

In our opinion

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The easy, knee-jerk reaction for the city of Anniston in wake of last Friday's pit-bull attack in Golden Springs would be to ban all pit-bull breeds from the city's limits. Cities across the United States — and several foreign nations, as well — have done that.

Why shouldn't Anniston?

Because that would be an irrational and unnecessary reaction. And it would be wrong.

Instead, Anniston should strengthen its ordinances so that owners of any dogs, pit bulls or not, are not only held legally responsible for the actions of their pets, but face significant penalties — hefty fines and the possibility of jail time — that might serve as a deterrent against irresponsible ownership.

If your dog is unprovoked and attacks somebody, you're responsible. And you might do time, depending on the seriousness of the attack.

Banning certain breeds would be a last resort, but one that should be undertaken if all other attempts at preventing dog attacks fail.

The breeds commonly known as pit bulls have become the poster dogs for those wary of unprovoked attacks. It's a lightning-rod issue of which there is no middle ground. Pit-bull owners say the breed is unjustly and incorrectly labeled as inherently violent; pit-bull opponents seem convinced that the breed is too dangerous for urban life and should be banned.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are telling. According to the CDC, more than 25 breeds of dogs have been involved in 238 fatal dog-bite attacks during the last 20 years. Of those, pit bulls and Rottweilers are responsible for more than half of the attacks.

CDC research also shows that pit bulls were responsible for one-third of all fatal dog attacks in the United States from 1981 to 1992. Research from more recent CDC studies indicates similar results.

Don't care about CDC statistics? Fine. Then listen to Keith Putman, the Anniston animal control officer, who told The Star this week that half to three-quarters of the dog attacks he handles involve pit bulls.

Clearly, pit bulls can be violent.

However, the CDC makes it clear that other dog breeds also can be violent — and can become so at a higher rate than do pit bulls — and that the consideration of banning certain breeds brings up “constitutional and practical issues.”

Banishment isn't an easy solution, and even the effectiveness of breed-specific legislation remains clouded in controversy both in the United States and in other nations.

Now is the perfect time for Anniston to handle this properly and put the onus on dog owners. Small fines and misdemeanor charges aren't strong-enough penalties. Rewrite the ordinances, make dog owners responsible and send a message: If you're going to own dogs, you'd better control them. Or else.