Police chief shares reasons for proposals; animal owners speak out.

Limiting the number of dogs and cats in Gothenburg households was granted a reprieve.

After hearing testimony from pet owners, local city council members decided to table the issue at their Nov. 3 meeting.

At an earlier meeting, the council talked about restricting the number of cats and dogs in a household to four.

Increasing the limit to six because of complaints—mostly about cats—from citizens was discussed.

Under the proposal, residents wanting to keep more than six pets can apply for a permit at the police department which includes an inspection of where the animals are kept by the police chief.

As a homeowner and taxpayer, Richard Stroessner said he doesn't think the measure is a good use of property taxes. Richard said that allowing the police chief to enter his home is a violation of his fourth amendment rights.

Because Gothenburg is surrounded by farms, Stroessner said the dogs and cats creating problems could come in from the country when city animals are in heat.

He asked if the number of pets owners have now could be grand fathered in if it's over the limit.

“It seems discriminatory and I don’t see that it’s a police matter in regulating how many pets you have especially within the confines of a home,” Stroessner said.

With passage of such a law, he said the next step might be limiting the number of children, hamsters and other beings in one’s home.

Stroessner said he’s talked to a member of the American Civil Liberties Union who agreed the proposal was a violation of a person’s rights.

Lois Stanton admitted she was over the proposed legal limit with cats but said she is spaying and neutering them and has had some euthanized.

Stanton said people also dump cats, some of which are wild, at her houses and expect her to take care of them.

Like Stroessner, she said the proposal doesn’t really address the issue of the overpopulation of cats and dogs.

She said allowing the police chief to inspect one’s home could be likened to checking to see what people have in their freezers.

“It also costs the chief’s time,” Stanton said.

She suggested other possibilities to deal with the problem pointing to organizations in other cities that are committed to helping trap, neuter and adopt out animals.

Kim Stroessner said she also disagreed with the proposal, describing herself as a responsible cat owner who feels the law would violate her fourth amendment rights.

If the law is adopted, police chief Randy Olson said he doesn't plan to knock on people's doors and count animals.

Olson said the proposal is designed to give the police department tools to deal with large numbers of cats and dogs in households which have become a nuisance.

The police chief told of a situation where a local man became overwhelmed with 32 cats in his house. Although neighbors had complained about the smell, Olson said the police couldn't do anything about it until it was a nuisance.

"No one was arrested or jailed," Olson explained. "We helped him find homes for the non-diseased cats and the Gothenburg Animal Hospital helped with spaying and neutering. We also got him some mental health help."

Olson said he didn't care what the limitation number is but it needs to be at a certain level so police can give help if needed.

"My idea of the ordinance isn't to punish good pet owners...but have a tool for the police department to use when we run into these crazy situations," he said. "It's a win situation for everyone."

He added that he has no issue with responsible pet owners but wants to limit cats that are feral, noting that the department has spent time and money catching wild cats in the city.

When asked if such a law could be passed, city attorney Mike Bacon said the issuance of a permit is different than unreasonable search and seizure. Bacon described the proposal as a prevention of a nuisance which is more reasonable than charging license fees for someone with 96 cats.

Richard Stroessner said he agreed with what had been discussed and asked if pet owners like himself could be grand fathered in with the number of cats and dogs he has.

Bacon said nuisances can't be grandfathered in, adding that the proposal helps keep animal habitat safe, sanitary and protected. He said feeding stray animals could also be considered a nuisance.

Council member Jim Aden said he's uncomfortable with infringing on people's rights, noting that the number of pets allowed is difficult to decide.

Aden said he thinks there's a solution and preferred not to "get in a hurry and slap on a number."

"Maybe there's a program to spay and neuter...we're jumping from nothing to a number," he said about the proposal. "I agree it's an issue but I personally don't want to jump to conclusions."

Aden said he has no issue with the current police chief counting pets in homes but "we could have a different chief down the road" that may perceive the ordinance differently.

Council president Jeff Kennedy said he feels his rights are infringed upon when large numbers of cats run around his neighborhood.

"This allows the police department to have more tools to deal with it," Kennedy said.

Olson said spay and neuter programs cost a lot of money and that North Platte, which has such a program, doesn't have the ability to support it.

City administrator Bruce Clymer said he'd like to see a limit, noting that a neighbor with a cat unintentionally infringes on his rights but he lives with it.

"If you have more than six, the city allows a way for you to get permitted for more," Clymer said, adding that if pet owners don't like the number, they can complain to the council. "I believe there's a silent majority that would like to have a limit."

Council member Jeff Whiting said he didn't want to rush into anything that might create more problems, adding that there might be other alternatives.

Although council member Tim Strauser said his job takes him into many homes—some of which are unhealthy for pets—he wants to protect animals without infringing on people's rights.

"I'd like to find a happy medium," Strauser said.

Mayor Joyce Hudson asked if the council agreed the issue needed to be addressed which members said they did.

"We need to do something that protects both parties," Hudson said. "We'll table the animal numbers now but be aware that we have issues."

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