

All impounded dogs in Contra Costa shelters to be spayed or neutered, panel explores

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MARTINEZ -- Any dog impounded and released from a Contra Costa animal shelter will be spayed or neutered if a proposed ordinance continues its course toward adoption.

Prompted by the fatal July pit bull mauling of 2-year-old Jacob Bisbee in Concord, supervisors initially proposed altering just that breed, but the board's public protection committee this week endorsed spaying and neutering all impounded dogs.

State law requires dogs adopted at shelters to be fixed, so an ordinance would affect only the canines that owners take home. Dogs deemed dangerous already must be altered before leaving the pound.

"We still have a serious kennel overpopulation issue that is not unique to Contra Costa County," said Glenn Howell, animal services director. "We have a problem with unaltered dogs and unaltered dogs at large cause additional problems."

Unaltered dogs often have more aggressive tendencies, Howell said. Two of the three pit bulls that attacked Jacob hadn't been altered.

A mandatory spay-neuter ordinance would target "irresponsible owners," Howell said. The program would cost about \$81,000 for an additional veterinary technician, but would pay for itself as owners would be required to pay from \$50 to \$150 for the procedure. Owners already must pay redemption fees, including a \$30-a-day impound fee.

The director said he is not concerned the additional spay-neuter cost would keep owners from taking back their pets.

"More than the overall money issue, it might be those individuals who don't "... want their dog spayed or neutered.

"Mainly it's guys, quite honestly, who are super-duper macho and into their (pit bulls) "... but that's not the majority of people we deal with," Howell said.

If it becomes a money issue for a loving owner, the shelter can "work something out," Howell said. Supervisor John Gioia, who sits on the public protection committee, asked Howell to investigate exempting breeders.

Some dog-owner advocacy groups oppose the plan.

"Mandatory spay-neuter has not had any effect on improving dog bites," said Laura Sanborn, co-founder of Orinda-based Save Our Dogs. "The impact of these laws falls largely on low-income owners that can't afford impound fees and "... they frequently have to abandon their dogs to the shelter or "... on the street."

Sanborn and other advocates say such laws make matters worse. More dogs are euthanized after mandatory fixing programs, said Kimberly Meredith, a Concerned Dog Owners of California board member. She cites Los Angeles County, where dog euthanizations rose 24 percent in 2008, the first year of a mandatory spay-neuter program.

Such an ordinance would add to the strain on the county's two shelters, in Martinez and Pinole, which take in about 16,000 animals annually, Howell said. The additional procedures would mean the redeemed dogs would spend more time at the shelters, which have space issues. The economy has increased animal impounds, particularly in East Contra Costa, where foreclosed homeowners often leave behind pets, Howell said.

Oakland, and Sonoma, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, have mandatory spay-neuter ordinances, he said.

For nearly a decade, Oakland has required spaying or neutering unlicensed, impounded dogs if redeemed by their owners, said animal services director Megan Webb.

"It's been a critical, critical piece of legislation for us" said Webb, whose city-run shelter receives almost 20 dogs a day. "Many of these strays are roaming around and breeding in a completely uncontrollable way."

Pit bulls and pit-mixed breeds are Contra Costa's major problem, Howell told the committee Tuesday.

"Because it's No. 1 by far at the shelter, it's also the No. 1 dog euthanized."

Howell will return to the committee in January and report how other jurisdictions with similar ordinances have fared, and the committee will make a recommendation to the full board.

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By the numbers

A bite, as defined by the state for rabies control, is any time a dog's teeth break a human's skin.

Dog bites in Contra Costa County:

2002 1,016

2003 972

2004 947

2005 875

2006 929

2007 1,014

2008 1,091

2009 1,115

Source: Contra Costa Animal Services