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EDITORIAL

Protection from dogs

CONSIDERING THE RASH of dog maulings in the last four years -- some fatal -- the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors made the right decision Tuesday when it unanimously passed a law regulating ownership of dangerous dogs.

The law requires a permit be obtained by owners of dogs that demonstrate potentially dangerous behavior or that have already injured or killed a person or another animal in the past. A "potentially" dangerous dog is defined as any animal (except a police dog) that, on two occasions within a 36-month-period, forces someone who is not on its owner's property to take defensive action to avoid harm; an animal that bites a person for no reason; or one that engages in other behavior that threatens people or livestock. A "dangerous" dog is one that has severely injured or killed a person or animal, is used in the commission of a crime or attacks livestock off the owner's property.

The owners will be required to keep the animals in a secure environment that does not threaten the peace, and register them with the county. Dogs that are deemed to dangerous to own may be destroyed.

Supervisor John Goia, who co-authored the law, is right when he says we should be imposing these conditions before the dogs bite.

The law should, however, help animal services track troublesome animals and prevent them from causing serious damage.

Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier said he was motivated to do something about felons owning dangerous dogs after the mauling of 11-year-old JaQuan Rice Jr., as the boy was walking near his Concord home.

Convicted felons would be prohibited from owning any dog heavier than 20 pounds, regardless of whether it is deemed a threat.

While it is probably not a good idea for convicted felons to own dogs that can be used as weapons, the problem is bad owners, period, who don't train their animals or who deliberately teach them to be aggressive.

We're not just talking about out-of-control pit bulls and Rottweilers. Most of the dogs that are biting children and mail carriers are small dogs with Napoleon complexes, but because of their size, they remain below the radar. Maybe we ought to consider passing a law requiring anyone who adopts a dog from the pound to attend obedience classes, regardless of the dog's size.