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Contra Costa cracks down on aggressive dogs

By Rebecca Rosen Lum
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Owners of dogs with a recent history of lunging, biting or nipping will be required to take out a county permit under a new law approved Tuesday by Contra Costa supervisors.

Convicted felons may not own them at all. The law, which takes effect Dec. 15, applies to the entire county except Antioch, which has its own animal control services.

Costs of enforcing the new law will be covered by fees and fines, which will be set at a separate hearing Dec. 13.

The ordinance, by Supervisors John Gioia of Richmond and Mark DeSaulnier of Concord, himself the owner of a Rottweiler, replaces previous county law that covered only dangerous dogs.

The new law also regulates potentially dangerous dogs -- canines that have been cited for two unprovoked attacks in three years or have injured an animal or a person in the same period.

"If you go out and buy a pit bull today, you don't need a permit," Gioia said. "If in two weeks it bites somebody, then you need a permit."

A Martinez man broke down in tears while recounting how a pit bull tore into the head of his small puppy at a local park.

"Four women came running up with various utensils and beat the dog off my dog," said Gilbert Lee Jorgensen. "I hadn't carried a cane or anything like that before, but now I carry one in case a dog attacks anyone."

But Ruth Stoiber, whose disabled son only ventures out when he is with his Labrador mix, said the law threatens a "vulnerable population."

The law replaces one that is purely advisory and does not have tougher rules for felons.

Gioia dismissed the concerns of a speaker from Antioch animal control, who fretted that the ordinance would spur owners of aggressive dogs to move to that city.

No other city or county prohibits felons from owning dangerous canines, said county Animal Control Director Glen Howell.

But "most jurisdictions have something that deals with potentially dangerous dogs," he told the supervisors. "We're one of the very few who can do nothing but give a recommendation. We're on the late show here."

It is one of a spate of laws enacted in cities and counties around the state targeting aggressive dogs.

Also Tuesday, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a law requiring the neutering or spaying of pit bulls, including mixed breeds. It carries fines of up to \$1,000.

San Francisco enacted the law in the wake of the mauling death of a 12-year-old boy by his family's two pit bulls in June.

Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, is working on legislation that would tightly control dog owners statewide, said aide Craig Cheslog.

Gioia and DeSaulnier began working on the Contra Costa law in May after a pit bull owned by a Concord man gnawed through a fence and ripped into the arms and legs of 12-year-old JaQuan Rice Jr.

And last month, an aggressive dog bit a sheriff's deputy at the North Richmond home of a convicted felon, Gioia said.

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Supervisor Mary Piepho praised DeSaulnier and Gioia for crafting a law that is "not breed-specific, but behavior-specific."

In January, state law will allow cities and counties to enact breed-specific laws.

Local agencies could require certain dog breeds to be spayed and neutered and to demand that owners have liability insurance for them.

Rebecca Rosen Lum covers county government. Reach her at 925-977-8506 or rosenlum@cctimes.com.

Details of new law

Highlights of Contra Costa's new dog ordinance:

Permit required: Owners of dangerous and potentially dangerous dogs will be required to obtain permits for their canines.

Potentially dangerous dog: One that acted aggressively twice within three years; bit a person causing a minor injury; injured another domestic animal; or poses an immediate threat to public safety.

Dangerous dog: One that has inflicted severe injury or killed a person; been used during the commission of a crime; or attacked livestock off its owner's property.

Muzzle and leash: Dangerous and potentially dangerous dogs must be muzzled and on a leash 6 feet or shorter when away from home.

Violations: Dog owners who violate the terms of the permit could lose the dog and forfeit for up to five years the right to own an animal.

Felons: Could not own any dog deemed dangerous or potentially dangerous.

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