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Board to weigh permits for aggressive dogs

By Rebecca Rosen Lum
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Owners of big dogs and those who fear the animals this week will debate the merits of a county ordinance that would require the owners to have permits.

Citing a spate of savage attacks by out-of-control dogs, Contra Costa Supervisors John Gioia of Richmond and Mark DeSaulnier of Concord have proposed strict controls for owners.

If the supervisors approve the ordinance, everyone interested in owning a big, aggressive dog would have to obtain a permit.

If the permit holder's animal is deemed dangerous or potentially so, all outings will require a muzzle and a leash no longer than 6 feet.

Convicted felons could not own any dog deemed dangerous or potentially dangerous, or whose strength, aggression and tolerance for pain threatens public safety.

The supervisors, who have received calls, letters and e-mails for and against the ordinance, expect a vocal turnout.

The ordinance defines as "potentially dangerous" those canines that have been cited for two unprovoked attacks in three years or have injured an animal or a person within the same period.

Gioia said the ordinance aims to contain "aggressive, uncontrollable dogs" that "roam the streets and terrorize residents and children."

The two supervisors began working on the idea in May after a Concord man's pit bull gnawed through a fence and ripped into the arms and legs of 12-year-old JaQuan Rice Jr.

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

"We should not allow felons to own dogs that can be trained to attack, maim or even kill another living being," said DeSaulnier, himself a Weimaraner owner.

BAD RAP, an organization for pit bull owners, "supports any efforts to protect animals from misuse and harm," said executive director Donna Reynolds.

But "if we want to be smart about this, we have to acknowledge that even the smallest dogs can pose very real risks when poorly managed."

It's one of a spate of laws enacted in cities and counties around the state targeting dangerous dogs.

A new state law would allow cities and counties to focus on spaying and neutering specific breeds. Dog owners have begun circulating petitions to nullify it.

"It doesn't target the true problem -- it says these dogs are making the news so let's ban or restrict them," said Dawn Capp, a Sacramento attorney organizing the effort.

The recently passed law was, in part, a response to the mauling death of Nicholas Faibish, 12, in Francisco by his family's pit bulls.

Four years ago, Diane Whipple, 33, was killed by two Presa Canario dogs in her San Francisco apartment building in a case that put the dogs' owners, both lawyers, behind bars.

"The group that's interested in doing this has every right to do it -- but I'm convinced that the majority of Californians think this is a necessary and important law," said state Sen. Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough, who introduced the legislation. "We can't have vicious maulings of children and adults by these dogs."

If successful, the ballot proponents said they would advocate different laws, including hiring additional animal control officers and imposing breeder permit requirements, and strict penalties for loose vicious dogs, regardless of breed.

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