

Posted on Sat, Oct. 22, 2005

Law would bite at owners of aggressive dogs, breeds

By Rebecca Rosen Lum
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Two Contra Costa supervisors want to leash owners of the kinds of dangerous dogs involved in savage attacks on children and adults since 2001.

If the proposal, by Supervisors John Gioia of Richmond and Mark DeSaulnier of Concord, passes Tuesday, everyone interested in owning a big, aggressive dog would have to obtain a permit.

And if the permit-holder's best friend is deemed dangerous or potentially so, all outings will require a muzzle and a leash 6 feet or shorter.

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

In San Francisco, where a family's two pit bulls killed a 12-year-old boy, Mayor Gavin Newsom tightened restrictions on backyard breeding and stepped up fines for those who fail to register their dogs.

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

The Contra Costa County law would take an uncompromising view of those who train testy dogs to attack.

Call it an ordinance with teeth. A person who violates the terms of the permit could lose the dog and forfeit for up to five years the right to own an animal.

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" who "roam the streets and terrorize residents and children."

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

If they want a big but harmless dog, they must make their case before Animal Control officers.

The county's current, more genteel dog ordinance makes recommendations, not requirements, and does not have tougher rules for ex-felons.

"We don't want to wait until the dog has caused harm to another animal or person," Gioia said.

Aggressive dogs are more of a threat than an unloaded gun, said District Attorney Robert Kochly.

"A dog is never unloaded," Kochly said. "We are targeting irresponsible people. Our history with these incidents in Contra Costa tells us that this is a good way to protect the public."

The two supervisors began working on the idea 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.

This 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.

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An inmate support group took issue with that idea. The ordinance unfairly targets ex-felons, said a spokeswoman for Friends Outside.

"Unless, of course, you have a previous conviction related to dogs," said executive director Mary Ann Ban Buren. "If they're just picking on a felon because they can, that's another matter."

Pit bull defenders are urging calls and letters to the supervisors.

BAD RAP, an East Bay organization of pit bull lovers, notes that the Little Rascals' "Petey" was a pit bull. The group's Web site shows a photo of blind writer Helen Keller with a pit bull companion.

"BAD RAP 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."

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

State Sen. Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough, sponsored the bill with Torlakson. Local agencies could require certain dog breeds to be spayed and neutered and to demand that owners have liability insurance for them.

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