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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Limits proposed on felons owning some dogs

- [Patrick Hoge, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Convicted felons would be barred from owning aggressive dogs or those weighing more than 20 pounds under legislation Contra Costa County supervisors will consider Tuesday.

Prompted by vicious dog attacks in recent years, particularly the mauling in 2001 of a Richmond boy by two pit bulls, supervisors John Gioia and Mark DeSaulnier and District Attorney Bob Kochly crafted an ordinance that would strengthen the county's dangerous dog rules without focusing on any particular breed.

Beyond restricting the types of dogs felons can own, the proposed law would lower the threshold and make more specific the criteria for declaring a dog "potentially dangerous" -- one step below being certified dangerous. It would also for the first time require owners of such dogs to apply for a permit to keep their pets, although they might not receive one.

"These aggressive, uncontrollable dogs roam the streets and terrorize residents and children," said Gioia. "That's wrong. No one should feel trapped in their home because they're afraid they're going to be attacked by a dog."

Under the new law, county animal services officers would have authority to declare a dog "potentially dangerous" under several conditions, including:

- Within a three-year period, the animal on two occasions caused anyone to take defensive action to avoid being injured when off the owner's property.
- An animal without provocation bit a person, causing a minor injury.
- An unprovoked animal threatened, injured or killed a domestic animal.
- If a dog presents an immediate threat to public safety.

A dangerous dog would be classified as any dog that without provocation severely injured or killed someone, attacked livestock, was used in the commission of a crime or was designated "potentially dangerous" dog repeatedly showing unacceptable behavior.

Among other things, owners of dogs deemed potentially dangerous or dangerous must keep the animal securely contained on their property, and muzzle and leash the animal when it is not on the owner's property.

Owners of dangerous dogs also would have to carry liability insurance of \$100,000 per animal. If they violated the terms of their permit, they could be charged with a misdemeanor and a court could order the animal destroyed. Some in law enforcement praised the proposal.

- more -

Dog Ordinance, San Francisco Chronicle, Page 2

"I think it's an excellent idea," said Contra Costa County Sheriff's Lt. Donny Gordon, who recounted how a deputy in August was attacked by a pit bull while trying to arrest a parolee.

Ex-felons who want to keep a large dog that they believe is harmless may file petitions with the county's animal services department for review.

Sponsors of the proposed law cited various recent dog attacks, including one from May in which a guide dog in training and his handler were attacked by a pit bull at a BART station in Pittsburg.

Kirsten Park, a spokeswoman for the East Bay Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said the proposal sounded good to her because it is not breed-specific -- such as the ban on pit bulls that Denver enacted -- and addresses instead problem behaviors.

"We support communities' rights to keep their citizens safe," she said. "Breed-specific laws give a false sense of security to the public."

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