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Dog breed ban bill barks up wrong tree

Enterprise Editorial, Park Rapids Enterprise
Published Saturday, March 01, 2008

New bills in the state Legislature this year address recent dog attacks. One bill, authored by John Lesch (DFL-St. Paul) seeks to ban five breeds of dogs considered by Lesch to be "inherently dangerous."

While the issue of dangerous dogs deserves discussion, a ban on specific breeds is uncalled for. It is the owners of aggressive dogs who need scrutiny, not a pedigree.

The five breeds listed in the bill - rottweilers, pit bulls, chow chows, akitas and wolf hybrids - have been responsible for a significant percentage of dog attacks, claims Lesch. This may be true, but the breeds of dogs involved in attacks fluctuate with pet owner trends. In the 1970s and '80s, German shepherds topped the dangerous dogs list. Doberman pinschers also took their turn as a dog to be feared.

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The real issue is dangerous and negligent owners. The reason most dogs are dangerous is because owners mistreat them, or worse, train them to be vicious. In fact, some people select breeds of dogs for their aggressive reputation to aid in attack training. Dog owners need to take responsibility for their pets, in the same way they would be responsible for any other property.

Banning specific breeds poses several problems. For responsible owners with a banned breed, it means giving up an animal many regard as another member of the family. Those who own dogs for their violent characteristics will either fail to license them (and in the process, neglect to obtain proper vaccinations and veterinary care), or move on to different breeds and cross-breeds as attack animals.

The counter-bill from Rep. Michael Paymer (DFL-St. Paul) makes more sense, and carries the support of the Minnesota Animal Control Association and the Humane Society. Paymer's bill would increase penalties for repeat offenders of

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dangerous animal laws, and in some cases, ban offenders from owning any breed of dog.

The public does deserve to be safe from dangerous animals, and it is good to have debate on how to mitigate the issue. But in the case of many uncontrolled animals, it's negligent owners who should be put on a leash.

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