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## An emotional outcry from pit bull owners drives council to drop breed ban

by Sara Sedlacek · December 10, 2008

A large and emotional crowd packed council chambers last week, each speaking out on behalf of the dogs they love. More than 20 concerned pit bull owners came to the meeting of the West Liberty City Council Tuesday, Dec. 2, to plead with council to cease its discussion of a breed-specific ordinance which would ban pit bulls from city limits.

Among those in attendance were Tiffany Paul and Caitlin Holmquist. Though the pair are not pit bull owners, they believe very strongly breed-specific legislation (BSL) will not solve West Liberty's problem which, in their opinion, is an issue of poor dog ownership. The two women presented information to dispel myths about pit bulls and facts about BSL and showed a short video to council.

"I'm really glad you're all coming in to give us input," said Mayor Clifford McFerren. "The committee, which is Bob Hartman and myself, are working on drafting the original construct of the ordinance. There are a lot more steps that have to go forward so the more input the public puts in the more well-informed the council are. This has also brought to light where we're at on our licensing, where we're at on a lot of other things. This is opening up a lot of different doors and we're going to take a look at all of that."

McFerren explained the last thing council wants to do is have a knee-jerk reaction to any problems.

One councilor said he'd rather work with what the city already has rather than proceed with the BSL.

"We have a city code that covers vicious animals, guard and attack dogs that was passed in 1982. I encourage the committee to look at the existing code and the possibility of enforcement and to come back to us with one option of, perhaps, this ordinance that's being worked on and the other option being the actual adherence to the city code and if that's enough to achieve the safety that was brought as a concern by the police chief initially," said Councilor Gerry Wickham. "The reason why I would ask for that approach is it doesn't paint council into a corner of having to accept and possibly move forward with an ordinance. In fact, what we have on the books right now, if it was adhered to properly to ascertain the safety in our community and not to single out a specific breed but to be an intervention against any dog or animal that might be a problem, whether it be in terms of viciousness."

Councilor Bob Hartman said he was also concerned about the amount of time council may have unnecessarily spent on the BSL.

"I was just wondering if the council has had a chance to look at some of these items and all the information we've been inundated with, if the council's not looking at breed-specific, is it wasting our time to go through these committee meetings and have [the BSL] presented and then it ends up failing, would it be wise to find out what council's thinking?" Hartman inquired.

McFerren assured council the committee would look closely at the current code.

The floor was again open for comment.

"As you can see, a lot of people brought things here today and if anyone thinks for a minute that putting the name of a breed in a ban is not racism, I dare you to read the article in the Index where [Police Chief] Brewer was quoted on how a pit bull acted when he went into the yard of a pit bull owner and the pit bull was fenced in, how that dog was acting," said Holly Runge, choking back tears. "There's a new family who lives [in town]. They have a fenced in yard with a dog that weighs about two pounds. That dog attacks the fence, growls, snarls the entire time you walk by. Now, if banning pit bulls because of the way they act— if you were blind, what is the difference in the way a pit bull is acting and that two-pound dog?"

"I don't know how many people in this room have been bit by dogs," Runge continued. "I had a paper route when I was

younger. I was bit by a little, spaniel-type dog. I have a scar that goes along the right side of my foot. I received 14 stitches. I bet there's not a person in this room who has been bit by a pit bull but I bet there are a lot of people in this room who have been bit by other kinds of dogs. The number one trained guard and attack dog in the world is the German Shepard but I didn't see his name in there. Pit bulls are a phase. You aren't solving a problem by addressing them right now. When I grew up in the '70s it was Doberman Pinschers, in the '90s it was Rottweilers, now it's pit bulls. The people who are doing this and having these dogs that are causing these problems in those pictures you saw are moralless and lawless. They do not care. This is not going to solve any of your problems. This is not going to get rid of these people. They do not care about your laws. They don't care if their dogs are fixed; they don't care if they have shots. They don't care. They have those dogs for one reason and it's not a pet. I don't understand why you're trying to push good citizens out of this town for the behavior of a few people. You have to deal with a vicious dog, not a vicious type of dog."

McFerren said he agreed with Runge.

"I completely agree with you but one problem we've got under consideration with the owners, the ones who are doing improper things with their dogs, is they're not going to care and even if we ban a breed specifically, they're still not going to care. They're still going to bring them in and we need to keep that under consideration," he said. "We're trying to look at factual information because emotions can really take this thing away."

Another concern addressed came from a rural resident.

"As a neighboring rural person from the community, my concern is if this was passed and people did not properly adopt out their dogs or get rid of their dogs, where are those dogs going to end up? They're going to end up my problem in the rural community," said Lee Geertz of rural Nichols. "We have a pack of wild dogs. We recently have dealt with these issues. We've been in the area for 10 years and we deal with dogs being dropped off on our property on a regular basis. That's something you need to consider, too, is your neighboring communities. What impact are you going to have on them by trying to eliminate a certain breed."

After the discussion, McFerren asked council how they would like to proceed. Councilors Tom Pace, Bill Cline, Jose Elizondo and Wickham each said they would not vote for a breed-specific ordinance but would like to look at the current vicious dog ordinance and make improvements to it. Hartman said he would like to continue research on BSL but believes looking at the current ordinance would probably be most beneficial.

McFerren said council would no longer be looking at a breed-specific ordinance and the committee would move forward on improving the current vicious dog ordinance.

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