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## Commentary

Frank Keegan: Breed bans expose legislative folly



Frank Keegan  
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### **BALTIMORE -**

Nobody needs to muzzle Baltimore County Council members barking inanely about a pit bull ban because somebody's already neutered and lobotomized them.

The whole thing would be laughable except we're talking about serious injury and death, cruelty against magnificent animals, unwarranted government intrusion on citizens' homes and, worst of all, legislative lunacy that will actually make worse the very problem it claims to solve.

Helen Keller with her pit bull companion.

well.

We all know which road is paved with good intentions, so give Perry Hall Democrat Vince Gardina some benefit of the doubt on his proposed ordinance. He may mean

Without doubt pain and suffering endured by victims — mainly children — bitten by dogs are terrible.

The apparent rise in fatalities and severe injuries from dog bites clearly are reasons for government action.

But it does not follow that specific breed bans are appropriate or effective.

For the record, the Centers for Disease Control has not recorded the breed involved in fatal attacks since 1998 because it is irrelevant.

How do we define the breed? The most advanced DNA testing available cannot distinguish between a Chihuahua and a Great Dane.

So, in the unlikely event he can figure out how to prove a particular dog is an American pit bull terrier, here's what Gardina wants to do:

- » Require them to be kept in cages at all times and muzzled when out;
- » \$100 annual owner's license fee;
- » Routinely inspect owners' homes;
- » Require special insurance.

Constant caging and muzzling is not just impractical, it could turn even docile dogs into unsocialized beasts. The breed-specific fee is unenforceable. Forced home inspections are unconstitutional. And while he may think he has the power to require that owners buy insurance, Gardina can't make companies sell it.

This proposal is just one more attempt to remove accountability for very real social ills from those responsible.

The problem here is not dogs. The problems is humans.

Who we should punish for dog attacks are the people responsible, whether well-intentioned but irresponsible owners or the strutting, overcompensating little men trying desperately to prove their manhood through their dogs.

The law already distinguishes mere civil negligence from felonious attack. Use it.

Pit bulls may be fast, powerful and aggressive, but they are in no way inherently evil.

In fact the opposite is true. According to the American Temperament Society, pit bulls score 96, with 100 best and the average for all breeds hanging in the mid 70s. Helen Keller chose a pit bull as her companion, and if a deaf, dumb and blind girl is safe with the breed, anybody should be.

But what about the children? Politicians always utter that disarming cry. Dog bites of all breeds are the No. 2 cause of children going to emergency rooms. Ban dogs second.

No. 1? Baseball and football injuries. So we should ban those first, right?

Of course not. Lawmakers at all levels who refuse to stand against ineffective feel-good legislation are either chicken or addled.

One who is neither is Republican Councilman Bryan McIntire. He should fight this one like, uh, a terrier. Another county official with an ounce of sense and the courage to speak it is health officer Dr. Pierre Vigilance, who says his office "is not in favor of breed-specific legislation as it may only serve to unfairly label certain breeds as 'dangerous.'"

It can do worse than that. A veterinarian for the Humane Society, Dr. Leslie Sinclair, has said breed bans "give people a false sense of security. If the laws already on the books are not being enforced, a new law will not work."

Council hearing

2 p.m., Oct. 9, Old Courthouse, 400 Washington Ave., Towson

Biting dogs and their victims

[University of Minnesota](#) estimates:

- » 4.7 million dog bites occur annually in the US.
- » 368,245 persons are treated in emergency departments for nonfatal dog bites annually.
- » 42 percent children aged under 14
- » Boys, 293.2 per 100,000; girls, 216.7
- » 16,476, 7.9 percent of all injuries, work related
- » 3.2 times more children required medical attention than adults, 6.4 vs. 2 per 1000
- » More likely to bite: Males 6.2 times; sexually intact 2.6; chained 2.8
- » 1979-98, pit bulls and mixes responsible for 32 percent of fatalities
- » unrestrained on owner's property, 58 percent of fatalities

Q How can local laws prevent dog bites?

A The most effective dangerous dog laws are those that place the legal responsibility for a dog's actions on the owner

rather than on the dog. The best laws hold the owner accountable for the bite victim's pain and suffering, and mandate certain corrective actions such as spay/neuter and proper confinement of the dog. For more information on legislation that will effectively reduce dog bites in your community, contact The HSUS. For guidance on developing a dog bite prevention plan in your community, read the American Veterinary Medical Association's A Community Approach to Dog Bite Prevention.

For more information, go to the [Human Society of the United States](#), and click here for information on [dog bite laws](#). [Pit Bull Terrier Rescue](#) also offers information on the breed.

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