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IN OUR VIEW

Breed-specific laws bark up the wrong tree

As Monroe gnaws on the idea of enacting "breed-specific legislation" that would brand some dogs as "potentially dangerous," a few things should be kept in mind:

All dogs are potentially dangerous. All of them.

The official position of The Humane Society of the United States is that breed-specific laws do not work. The Humane Society cites a 2000 study in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association that states while breed is one factor that contributes to a dog's temperament, it can't be used alone to predict whether a dog may pose a danger. The report details bite-related fatalities in the United States from 1979 through 1998, and found that in 19 years examined in the study, at least 25 different breeds or crossbreeds of dogs were involved in fatally wounding human beings.

The main conclusion of the study was that breed-specific legislation doesn't work for several reasons: there are inherent problems in trying to determine a dog's breed, making enforcement of breed-specific legislation difficult at best; that fatal attacks represent a very small portion of bite-related injuries and should not be the major factor driving public policy; and that existing non-breed-specific legislation already exists and offers promise for the prevention of dog bites.

It's estimated that more than 4.5 million dog bites occur each year, with 10-20 fatal attacks.

The Humane Society correctly believes that one problem stemming from breed specific legislation is that: "... the 'problem dog' at any given time is often the most popular breed among individuals who tend to be irresponsible, if not abusive, in the control and keeping of their pets. Simply put, if you ban one breed, individuals will just move on to another one. Banning a breed only speeds up the timetable."

The same individuals who abuse dogs to make them dangerous are also the ones who don't neuter or spay their dogs (which leaves them prone to meanness), who do chain them up (same) and who don't pick up after them. Intact male dogs are involved in 70 to 76 percent of reported dog bite incidents. (Why is it that certain manly men who would never, ever neuter their dog have no problem leaving him chained up, unable to fulfill his biological urges?)

The Humane Society advises a proactive, community approach to preventing dog bites, which includes comprehensive "dog bite" legislation, consumer education and forced responsible pet-keeping efforts. Under such a program, Nevada was able to reduce the number of bite incidents by about 15 percent. Monroe would be smart to emulate such a program, rather than creating an ineffectual breed-specific law.

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