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Fact Checker: Input makes difference on animal rules

Fact checker by Mark Robison • factchecker@rgj.com • February 1, 2011

The claim

Proposed changes to Washoe County's animal ordinances will require your horse or sheep to have the same shelter as a dog, change where your dog must be on a leash, ban exotic cats and require microchipping if your animal is impounded.

The background

Washoe County Regional Animal Services has spent about a year coming up with suggested ordinance changes, which it seeks public input on before presenting them to the board of commissioners.

In response, an anti-animal rights group called Nevada's People for Animal Welfare, or NVPWA, sent out an e-mail warning: "If we don't let our voices be

heard, this will be shoved down our throats."

What follows are four of the e-mail's criticisms that affect the most people.

What's a pet? The e-mail says the proposal "changes the definition of livestock to exclude horses, cows, sheep, etc. unless they are commercial -- so your stock are now your pets unless they are for commercial use."

Animal control said this wording change was intended to get rid of ambiguity over the definition of domestic animals and to fit with new state requirements for disaster assistance. The agency can help evacuate domestic but not commercial animals.

NPAW board member Chris Vaught said she thinks this change could have the effect of requiring people to use the same standard of care for horses, cows and sheep as they do for cats and dogs.

"Do I want to have to take care of sheep the way I take care of my dogs?" she said. "Sheep grow heavy coats in the winter and are fine outside. But now you're talking about everybody must build a four-walled shelter, and that would be onerous."

She also worries this is a slippery slope to licensing other animals, such as a plan to license horses in Oregon. And if horses are now pets, Vaught asks, then can people stop paying a head tax to the state for brand inspections?

Washoe animal control field supervisor Bobby Smith responded that this wording has been dropped and instead the agency will seek to change the definition of domestic animal to something like "an animal primarily for personal enjoyment."

Exotics and hybrids: The e-mail states the proposal "bans exotic cats (the new definition of exotic includes hybrids). This will affect cat show people as several show breeds of cats that are a hybrid of small exotics, like servals and domestic cats. This will make these fanciers criminals!"

The proposal does not ban exotic cats. It changes the definition of "exotic" to include all hybrids, or offspring of wild and domestic animals. So, for instance, a cat fancier with a serval hybrid would now require an exotic permit. (Servals are wild African cats with spots.)

Animal control manager Mitch Schneider said, "We're not saying you can't have the animal, but there's a heightened risk that needs to be addressed. It's a

public safety issue.

"Say you've got an animal that's 10 percent domestic dog and 90 percent wolf. Currently, it's ambiguous as to which it is, so this change in language is to clarify that. Otherwise, where do you split it to decide what is exotic and what is domestic?"



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Vaught said she's concerned the law is becoming stricter under the guise of public safety yet harms people such as fanciers with hybrid show cats who aren't a threat to the community.

"If an animal is a danger, we have codes already to deal with that," she said.

Where dogs must be leashed in public: The e-mail says the proposal "changes zoning by making virtually every area of Washoe County 'animal congested areas.' "

Schneider said that no changes are proposed to the county's animal congested map, which you can view by searching for "congested maps" at washoecounty.us.

Dogs now must be leashed in public in any

incorporated area that's designated as "animal congested," meaning Reno and Sparks. But they can be off leash and merely under voice control in congested areas that are unincorporated, such as Sun Valley, Spanish Springs and parts of Lemmon and Golden valleys. The proposal would expand the leash requirement to everywhere that is considered animal congested.

Mandatory microchipping: The e-mail says the proposal "requires mandatory microchipping -- if you apply for a permit you must microchip; if your animal gets impounded, you must microchip to get it back."

Vaught said if a horse and pig get out and are impounded, they face microchipping.

Smith said this was an example of an "oops" that was brought to the county's attention by public input. He said impound microchipping should apply only to animals requiring licenses, meaning dogs.

The only permit proposal that requires microchipping involves requests to have extra pets over the limit.

Currently, you can't have more than three dogs in animal congested areas. Getting more requires a

kennel permit, building a kennel and going before a county board to plead your case.

The proposal would allow people to request a variance to have one or two extra dogs. Animal control field supervisor Bobby Smith gave an example of a couple with three dogs who have an

older child move back home after a foreclosure and the child also has a dog or two.

The couple could be cited for being over the dog limit. The variance would allow four or five dogs to live legally at the residence. But there's a catch.

To qualify, the dogs must be spayed or neutered and microchipped and owners must have a disaster preparedness plan -- carriers and pet supplies in case of evacuation.

Schneider said, "This is a carrot to say, 'Hey, if you want a fourth or fifth dog, then you can if you're not contributing to pet overpopulation and if they get out, we know where they belong.' Basically, if you're not a nuisance to your neighbors, it shouldn't be a problem to have an extra dog or two."

The verdict

The full e-mail's criticisms were factually accurate for the most part, although two of the four listed above were false, and Washoe County Regional Animal Services took them seriously and altered many of its proposed ordinance changes.

Some may have found the urgent tone of NVPAAW's e-mail abrasive, but it got people talking with animal control about its proposal whereas the changes might have gone through with little public attention.

Truth Meter: 6

Give your input



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» Online: You can read and comment on the proposed animal ordinance changes at washoecounty.us/animals.

» In person: There will be public workshops on the proposed changes from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Feb. 1 and 1 to 3 p.m. Feb. 11 in the Washoe County Health District conference room, at 1001 9th St. building C.

» Final approval: You can attend the first reading of the proposed changes prior to approval March 8 at the

Washoe Board of Commissioners meeting as well as
the second reading March 22