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Big cat owner says proposal overdone

A lot of residences bear the sign "Beware of dog," but in front of Zuzana Kukol's house is a sign that warns, "Beware of cat."

In this case, the cat isn't an ordinary Siamese, Maltese or tabby cat, but an eight-year-old, 350-pound white tiger named "Pepper."

Lately, Pepper has been a little jealous about the attention paid by her owner to "Bam Bam," a 10-month-old 110-pound African lion.

To complete the menagerie, Kukol also has an ocelot and a bobcat on her spacious property located in a remote part of Pahrump Valley.

Despite her overwhelming power and size, "Pepper" was hiding in her spacious cage when a reporter arrived for a visit, afraid of a strange human. That same fear of the unknown is what Kukol thinks is behind strict new regulations on exotic animal owners that are a major part of the proposed Nye County Animal Ordinance that will be discussed by county commissioners at 10 a.m. Tuesday.

Kukol showed a copy of a handout that urges: "Punish someone for deeds, not breeds."

"Go after the bad exotic owners," she said. "Why punish us for someone else's act?"

Kukol was referring to Gert Abby Hedengran, 58, and his wife Roena Emma Hedengran, 54, who recently moved to Pahrump. The



MARK WAITE / PVT
"Pepper," a 350-pound white tiger, relaxes in her cage.



MARK WAITE / PVT
Zuzana Kukol snuggles up to "Bam Bam", a lion cub, at her home in Pahrump.

Hedengrans were arrested March 16, 2005, at their former home in Moorpark, Calif., in Ventura County, after a Siberian tiger escaped and roamed for three weeks before being shot near an elementary school and public park in a residential neighborhood.

There were rumors of dangerous animals on the loose in Pahrump last December around the Hedengrans property. The Nye County Sheriff's Department and Nye County Emergency Services responded to the call, a Mercy Air helicopter even flew overhead, but no exotic animals were loose.

"Their housing is excellent," Debbie Pemberton, Nye County Animal Control Supervisor, told the Pahrump Valley Times. "I do not have any concerns with these animals getting out."

Pemberton, who compiled the ordinance draft, said she thought the alert came from nervous neighbors, after they heard lions roaring. At the time she said the Hedengrans had four or five caged lions and tigers as well as 14 smaller cats, like lynx and snow leopards.

"What happens if one of these animals gets out? It happened in California. It's a huge liability there," she said.

Gert Hedengran agreed to plead guilty to one felony count of making a false statement and one felony count of obstruction of justice in a plea agreement. The Justice Department claims Hedengran misled and obstructed officers who were attempting to track down and capture the tiger.

He also pleaded guilty to misdemeanor counts of improper transportation of exotic felines; improper handling of exotic felines, in a manner causing physical and emotional trauma; and exhibition of exotic felines without a license.

Thom Mrozek, a spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Central District of California, said U.S. District Judge George H. King had some questions about the vagueness of the animal welfare charges in the misdemeanor counts.

The only reaction to a reporter's visit at Kukol's house was some growling from Pepper. The lion cub was led out of his cage briefly for some photos, during which he endured some provoking from a Doberman. When Bam Bam reaches maturity, a trip out of the cage would be less likely. He will probably weigh 400 pounds and boast a beautiful mane.

Kukol said she agrees with provisions requiring double doors and perimeter fencing but complained about requirements for a \$1 million liability insurance policy and notification of neighbors within one mile.

"Don't treat us like pedophiles, telling everybody within one mile," Kukol said. "I've been here six years. My current neighbors like me. Why put me at the mercy of new neighbors? This county, there's so few people here. Why are they trying to regulate us like this? People move here for freedom."

Kukol said no animal should be at large, regardless of species.

She sought to dispel some of the hysteria about exotic animals. In Clark County, animal control reported 29 bites by animals other than dogs and cats, which includes horses, 3 percent of the total. Nationally, nine fatalities involved exotic mammals (over half by elephants) out of 227 fatalities reported from all animal attacks between 1992 and 1997.

It's a matter of scale, Kukol indicated, saying a \$1 million liability insurance policy would be applicable to some place like the Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Fla.

A Web site by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, PETA, reported 16 people were fatally mauled by big cats between 1990 and 2006, or one per year. All the deaths occurred on the property where the animals were kept, Kukol said.

While Kukol lives some distance away from her nearest neighbor, LDO Management has submitted plans for 42 lots on 84 acres near her home.

"Here we have two people per square mile. Why do we need all these ordinances?" she asked. "In Clark County they adopted a new ordinance in 2003, and they formed an animal control board where exotic animal owners have input."

Kukol said Clark County has gradually reduced its liability insurance requirements down to from \$10,000 to \$50,000, depending on the size of the cat. She said there are only a few companies in the country who offer the insurance. A \$1 million policy would require \$3,000 in premiums per year, with a \$10,000 deductible.

"If the regulations get so tough, sometimes it means a ban. People can't afford the insurance," Kukol said.

She said Pemberton's draft ordinance is based on an old Clark County ordinance, "which they never passed because it's so horrible."

Then there would be a \$500 initial fee and a \$250 annual permit fee. Nye County deputies would also be inspecting the facilities twice annually, while the animal control board would have authority to revoke her permit.

"You're subject to their mercy at any time," Kukol said. "Why? Because there's one idiot who shouldn't even be here if California officials were doing their job?"

Kukol said she doesn't need a federal license because she doesn't exhibit her lion and tiger as a commercial activity. She has a state license for the bobcat, which is a native species.

Pemberton said she's paying keen attention to the Hedengrans' case. She said the reason people like the Hedengrans are in Pahrump is because of a lack of ordinances on exotic animals. Existing county ordinances require exotic animal owners to get a permit, but she said, "The sheriff's office has never seen one, and they never issued a permit.

"If everyone with animals had a setup like Zuzana got, we wouldn't have an issue. If everyone was as conscientious as Zuzana is, we wouldn't have an issue," Pemberton said. "We're talking public safety here. One of these big cats get out, we're in a big deal of hurt."

Among a few other residents who harbor such animals, Pemberton said Brian Turner owns a couple cougars. But Carl Beck, who owned tigers and used to perform in magic shows on the Las Vegas strip, has moved out of Pahrump. Jeanie Stevenson, who brought a lion, tiger, cougar and four bobcats to Pahrump, has also left.

"They're my pets," Kukol said.

When it comes to Pepper, Kukol added, "I still go to the cage, I don't let her hug me. But Bam Bam, I could hug him forever."

For comment or questions, please e-mail webmaster@pahrumpvalleytimes.com