

SUN GAZETTE

NEWSPAPERS

Reaching the most affluent audience in the Washington D.C. Metro Area.

Close Window [x]

Proposed Ban on Venomous Snakes Tops Board Meeting Agenda

by SCOTT McCAFFREY, Staff Writer

(Created: Sunday, May 11, 2008 1:29 PM EDT)

County Board members on May 17 will act on a proposal to ban possession of poisonous snakes and reptiles.

As was reported in the Sun Gazette last month, county staff proposed the ban after one homeowner was found in possession of a large number of venomous snakes; several reportedly got loose in the neighborhood, causing an uproar among neighbors.

But the proposal has created an uproar of its own, from those across the nation who own exotic pets and say county officials are overreacting.

The proposed ban is "based on pure emotion and hysteria, instead of science and facts," said Zuzana Kukol, president of Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership (REXANO).

Kukol said individuals are far more likely to win the lottery, or be struck by lightning, than ever find themselves tangling with an exotic pet.

"It never ceases to surprise me how people fear exotic animals, and react to their fear of the unknown with hysteria, instead of educating themselves," Kukol said in a letter to the Sun Gazette.

The proposed ordinance would give owners of poisonous snakes 30 days to dispose of the animals, although board members could lengthen the time allowed.

There would be no "grandfathering" of existing pets under the proposal made by staff, although Kukol said that provision could cause legal trouble for the county, since pets are considered property and governments have only limited rights to take property from the public without compensation.

Possession of poisonous snakes would constitute a misdemeanor under the proposed ordinance.

According to county government officials, most localities across the Washington area already ban poisonous snakes. Among them: Fairfax County, Falls Church, Prince William County, Montgomery County, Prince George's County and the District of Columbia. Arlington and Alexandria are among the exceptions.

Current prohibitions on other exotic animals include:

* **Arlington:** Bans possession of farm animals/livestock, foxes, skunks and raccoons.

- * **Alexandria:** No prohibitions. The city currently is in the process of writing an ordinance.
- * **Fairfax County:** Bans possession of live monkeys and all “non-human” primates, raccoons, skunks, wolves, squirrels, foxes, leopards, panthers, tigers, lions, lynx or any other warm-blooded animal, tarantulas, crocodiles, alligators and other members of the crocodilian family.
- * **Falls Church:** Bans possession of all living wild or exotic animals other than dogs, cats, hamsters, guinea pigs, ferrets and birds purchased at a pet store, non-poisonous snakes less than eight feet in length, domestic rabbits, mice and rats bred in captivity and never living in the wild.
- * **Prince William County:** The restrictions are the same as in Fairfax, but Prince William makes a special note that ferrets, nonpoisonous snakes, rabbits and laboratory rats that have been bred in captivity and which never have known the wild are permitted.
- * **District of Columbia:** Bans possession of all animals except for a short list of domestic animals, including non-venomous snakes, dogs (excluding hybrids with wolves, coyotes, or jackals), cats (excluding hybrids with ocelots or margay), turtles, domesticated rodents and rabbits, captive-bred species of common cage birds, fish and racing pigeons (in compliance with permit requirements).
- * **Prince George's County:** Bans possession of pit bulls, ground hogs, skunks, raccoons, opossums, foxes, bears, wolves, other native wildlife and members of the cat family other than domestic cats.

Arlington County Manager Ron Carlee has proposed regional discussions, to determine if there would be a way to standardize restrictions on pet ownership throughout local jurisdiction. County staff plan to come back later with additional proposed prohibitions.