

Neighbors complain about dog rescue

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Woman says she's caring for Jack Russell terriers at Lake Church property until permanent site is found

Jack Russell terriers in danger of being killed are being rescued by a Milwaukee woman, who recently moved 14 dogs to a shed in the back yard of a friend who lives in Lake Church.

Now, neighbors want the dogs out of their neighborhood or at least a greater effort made to keep them from barking.

Penelope Wagner said Tuesday she's been operating the nonprofit First Friends Animal Rescue for 24 years in Milwaukee and is looking for a new home for the dogs. Her stay at 6067 Lake Church Rd. is only temporary, Wagner said.

"I'm not a commercial operation. I'm not a puppy mill. I'm not a breeder or a hoarder. I don't have vicious dogs," Wagner said.

"All these dogs are very sweet. These Jack Russells were on death row. I find the right homes for them and get an adoption fee of \$100 to \$150, which doesn't begin to pay my expenses."

Wagner said most of the places she's looked at cost more than \$300,000.

"My rescue can't afford that. I need a pole building or someplace for the dogs and a simple place where I can live," she said.

On Monday, several Lake Church residents told Town of Belgium officials that the barking dogs are a nuisance. Wagner said she was unaware her operation would be discussed and was not at the meeting.

"Sometimes, they're barking all night long," Ralph DeWall told town officials, who took no action but promised to look into it.

"I called the sheriff's department and a deputy got bit. But they said there wasn't anything they could do. She told them she was working with Charlie Parks (town zoning administrator)."

Linda Bublitz said her son works the night shift and the dogs keep him awake during the day when he has to sleep. The dogs bark from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., she said.

After the deputy's visit, Wagner said she talked with her neighbors, explained her operation and changed the time when she feeds the dogs to accommodate them.

"They don't bark at night. I have people who check on them and they report to me," she said. "The only time they bark is when I'm feeding them. I used to start at 6 a.m, but now I start at 9 a.m."

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Wagner said she feeds three or four dogs at a time and lets them run outside while she cleans the shed and runs, adds new straw and gives them fresh water.

“I have dog walkers who walk them when I’m not there,” she said. “They walk the dogs in the opposite direction so we don’t go by his (DeWall’s) house.”

Volunteers walk the dogs in parades to promote the rescue operation. Some go to nursing homes to cheer up residents.

Wagner, who has five Jack Russells of her own, said she helps find homes for other breeds, but her speciality is Jack Russells.

“I teach people about the breed and keep the dogs for at least six weeks to learn their personalities and the type of home they need,” she said. “I do background checks and a lot of research to find a forever home for these dogs.”

Town Chairman Francis Kleckner said he considers the rescue operation a kennel and that’s not allowed in a residential district.

Although the rescue operation is not a commercial enterprise, Parks said he advised Wagner to find a location in the country where the dogs will not bother neighbors and apply for a conditional-use permit.

“I went past the house a dozen times at various times of the day and only once did I hear them barking,” Parks said. “I went in the shed twice, and my ears are still ringing.

“I admire people who want to do this, but you have to do it in the right place. You need to give people time to rectify things. I’m not sure how long the town will give her or what they can do. We don’t have an ordinance limiting the number of pets people can have and I can’t make up one. However, with the neighbors’ complaints, I think they will give her a short leash on this one.”