

Curious kids stir Port chicken debate

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 13 February 2013 19:47

<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/021413/chickenSM.png> **Brother, sister have done their homework and want a coop in their city yard, but they'll have to convince reluctant officials**

For Joshua and Michaela Bultman, Port Washington's upcoming debate on urban chickens is about producing their own food and enjoying the process.

"I thought it would be fun," said Joshua, 11. "I want them for the eggs. I want to know where my food comes from. I also want them for pets.

"I like agriculture. It interests me."



Ideally, they would like a flock of 10 chickens at their Summit Drive home, said Michaela, 13, but their parents Ian and Amy nixed that idea.

"It's going to be four," their father said. "That's what we had growing up, and that was plenty. I don't want a chicken farm."

It was Joshua who asked that the Port Washington Common Council consider allowing urban chickens, a concept that has caught on around the country.

Aldermen, who last week agreed to look at the issue, are expected to discuss it further when they meet at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 5, City Administrator Mark Grams said.

In Ozaukee County, chickens are allowed in two municipalities, the Village of Fredonia and City of Mequon.

Adam Hady, agriculture agent for Richland County who is the co-author of "Poultry in Urban Areas," said the popularity of urban chickens can be traced back to the local food movement.

"People just want to go back to understanding where their food comes from and get that connection," Hady said. "A lot of it has to do with the whole local foods movement. "

Many families look at urban chickens as an educational experience for their children, he said.

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“It teaches children about the responsibility involved in caring for an animal, and they provide us with something in return — eggs,” Hady said.

It generally costs \$300 to \$400 to get started with four or five chicks, Hady said. A hen will typically lay 200 to 300 eggs a year, depending on the breed and age of the bird, he said, noting that it takes about 26 hours to produce an egg.

Cities and villages that allow chickens typically set limits on the number — usually between four and seven, Hady said.

The biggest concerns are noise, disease and how to handle manure, he said.

Many communities address the noise issue by prohibiting roosters, he said.

“Are chickens really loud? No,” Hady said. “Will you hear them sometimes? Sure.”

People often plant shrubs around the coop or run to help muffle any noises, he added.

The chance of disease is minimized by keeping coops clean, he said, adding this will also address any concerns that chickens will attract pests, including mice and rats, and predators. Coops and runs are also typically required to be fenced so the birds can't get free.

Manure produced by the chickens can be composted or used as fertilizer.

Many people fear that chickens will become prevalent if a community allows them, Hady said, but that's not the case.

In Madison, a community of 237,000 people that has allowed chickens since 2004, only 113 annual permits have been issued so far this year and 158 were issued last year.

“There are way more dogs and cats,” Hady said.

Many communities use a permit system, often with a trial period, to ensure the chickens don't cause a problem, Hady said.

The City of Baraboo, a community of about 12,000 people northwest of Madison, has allowed urban chickens in areas zoned for single-family homes since 2009.

“It's been a non-issue,” City Administrator Ed Geick said. “It wasn't a controversial thing, but there was a lot of discussion. We wanted to make sure the concerns of people were addressed.

“No one knew how many people wanted to raise chickens.”

The city has only issued six permits since the City Council approved urban chickens, he said.

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“To my knowledge, we haven’t gotten any complaints from neighbors,” he said.

As in Port Washington, the issue of urban chickens in Baraboo was brought up by a student who wanted to keep them, Geick said.

The City Council used Madison’s ordinance to guide it in crafting their own law, he said, noting it addresses everything from the number of chickens allowed — six hens, no roosters— to the need for a predator-proof, city-approved coops and spaces for the hens to run. Coops must provided two to four square feet of space for each chicken, and can’t be closer than 10 feet to a lot line.

The chickens must be kept in a covered coop or fenced area at all times.

Neighbors must be notified, and a permit won’t be issued if more than half of them object.

Community service officers with the police department inspect the coops, oversee the applications and deal with any complaints, Geick said. The one-year permits cost \$25 initially and \$10 when renewed.

Closer to home, in Fredonia, residents are required to obtain an annual \$15 permit to keep chickens. They are limited to six birds, and the owner must provide at least six square feet of space in a coop for each bird, to a maximum 48 square feet.

Neighboring property owners must be notified, and setback requirements must be met. The sale of eggs and slaughtering of birds is prohibited.

Joshua said he first started thinking about raising urban chickens after his mother brought home a book about the birds.

He did a report on raising chickens for school in 2010 after finding out the city didn’t allow chickens and submitted it to then-alderman Tom Hudson for consideration. Hudson complimented him on the report, Joshua said, but it didn’t go any further.

So he let it go. But last summer, after reading about the 12-year-old Fredonia boy who successfully petitioned the village to allow urban chickens, Joshua decided to try again.

He submitted his report to City Hall, where it was directed to Ald. Joe Dean. Dean wrote to him, complimented him and told him that after the 2013 budget was settled the city would consider the matter.

Joshua and his siblings are home schooled, and his parents said they consider this a learning experience.

“We look at everything as school,” his father said. “This is a great way for my kids to learn about civics. We said, ‘If you want this, you have to talk to the city about it.’”

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While all their nine children like the idea of keeping chickens, it is Joshua and Michaela who are most interested.

Joshua is the family farmer, their father joked, noting he keeps bees and is going to have a small maple syrup operation at a family friend's property in the Town of Grafton this year. Chickens are a natural offshoot.

Michaela is a font of information about chickens, listing the children's five favorite types — Rock Island Reds, silver laced Wyandottes, Plymouth Rock, Ameraucana and Silkie Bantams.

The children have researched coops and talked to some of the neighbors about the idea. Some of the neighbors have indicated an interest in having hens as well, they noted.

They've looked into the issues that typically come up when communities consider urban chickens, and formulated their responses.

And they've done the math. They want to raise the chickens from chicks, and figure it will take about four months before they start laying eggs. They figure it will cost about \$300 to start their endeavor, and that they'll save the family \$7 a week on eggs — paying for themselves after a year.

"Everybody's going green and organic," Michaela said. "They actually pay for their keep with their eggs. And they don't take a lot of work. You don't have to walk them."

Hady recommended communities consider the issue of urban chickens, saying they can learn by talking to those municipalities that have crafted regulations.

"It's worth sitting down and having the discussion, no matter which side you're on," he said. "In general, people have strong feelings one way or the other. Don't expect it to be smooth and easy. But it's a discussion worth having.

"If you do approve it, there's not going to be this massive explosion of birds everywhere. There'll be a few families here and there who raise them."

Image Information: PORT WASHINGTON'S DEBATE on allowing chickens to be raised in the city was spurred by a request from Joshua and Michaela Bultman, who want to produce the eggs their family enjoys. Photo by Sam Arendt

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