

Officials who made heavy weather of beekeeping can avoid another prolonged debate by looking beyond exaggerated concerns and allowing chickens in the city

The last time there was a buzz like this at City Hall was when a Port Washington family asked permission to keep a hive of honeybees in its yard.

Now, a young resident has asked the Common Council to allow chickens to be raised in the city, and based on the initial reaction from some aldermen, you would think the sky is falling.

Mere mention of a backyard chicken ordinance caused controversy last week when some aldermen — the same ones who initially opposed beekeeping — argued the council shouldn't even entertain the request. They lost the argument, in part because other officials recall the lessons learned from the great debate over a law allowing beekeeping, which was approved after a good deal of needless fumbling.

“Although I have a lot of concerns about having chickens in the city, I had a lot of concerns about having bees in the city, too,” said Ald. Mike Ehrlich, who voted to allow beekeeping.

So now there will be a debate, one that will undoubtedly include exaggerated claims of the threats chickens pose to the public's health and well-being.

The council can save the city a lot of time and angst by realizing that allowing the relatively few residents interested in keeping chickens to raise a handful of hens in their yards (most ordinances limit the number to between three and six and don't allow noisy roosters) and reap the rewards of locally produced food won't threaten city life as we know but will enhance it, much like beekeeping and the city's immensely successful community garden have.

That understanding should start with the realization the city isn't breaking new ground here. Many cities and villages big and small, urban and suburban, throughout the country allow chickens under reasonable ordinances. Among them are Milwaukee, St. Francis, Wauwatosa, Madison, New Berlin, Baraboo, Chicago and Minneapolis.

Closer to home, Mequon allows chickens in some parts of the city and the Village of Fredonia passed an ordinance last year allowing hens at the request of a 12-year-old boy.

It's worth noting, as Ald. Paul Neumyer did last week, that urban chicken keeping is not an entirely new concept.

“I had them when I was a kid in Glendale,” said Neumyer, who noted that several of his constituents have inquired about raising chickens. “I think this is worth vetting.”

Needless fretting over birds and bees

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It's not only worth vetting, it's worth allowing with the understanding that plenty of cities and villages have demonstrated that chickens and urban residents can coexist quite nicely.

Dismiss images of barnyard chicken coops. The operations allowed in cities are small and closely regulated — a few hens and a coop built and placed on lots in accordance with exacting standards. Slaughtering isn't allowed and many ordinances give neighbors the ability to challenge a chicken license, much like Port's beekeeping law.

Chicken-keeping proponents have argued that pet dogs, especially poorly behaved one that bark incessantly, nip at people and aren't picked up after are far bigger nuisances than chickens. Judging from the Port Washington Police Department's weekly report, they have a point.

While the reasons to fear urban chickens aren't compelling, the reason to allow them are. Enlightened Port residents have demonstrated a desire for locally grown food by supporting the extremely popular downtown summer farmers market and winter market. What's more, residents tilled more than 70 plots in the city's community garden and harvested bushels and bushels of produce during the garden's first season.

Beekeeping has added to the grow-local movement, and allowing chickens would reinforce the message that Port Washington is an enlightened community where residents are allowed to produce some of what they eat.

For guidance in this matter, officials can recall the great bee debate. Although much was made of the alleged threat these valuable pollinators would pose, swarms of marauding bees have not plagued the city.

And no, allowing chickens in the city won't cause the sky to fall.