

Officials balk at requests to keep chickens in City of Port

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Residents make their case but don't convince aldermen to vote on issue

City of Port Washington residents won't be allowed to keep chickens in their yards.

Despite the appeals of five residents who spoke in favor of the idea of allowing people to raise chickens in the city, aldermen declined to even make a motion asking City Attorney Eric Eberhardt to draw up an ordinance for consideration.

Instead, after each alderman offered his position, they moved on to the next item on their agenda.

"If I make a motion to consider drafting an ordinance, it's not going to pass anyway from what I hear," Ald. Jim Vollmar said.

Port Washington's decision comes just as the Town of Grafton considers an amendment to its ordinances that would allow chickens in residential areas. Like the City of Port, the town allows chickens to be raised in agricultural districts.

The residents who spoke to Port Washington aldermen Tuesday overwhelmingly favored the idea of allowing chickens.

Eleven-year-old Joshua Bultman, who with his sister Michaela asked that the Common Council consider allowing urban chickens, told aldermen that there were many reasons to allow it.

Chickens, he said, are good for the environment, provide healthy food and teach youngsters where their food comes from.

"They're easier to take care of than cats and dogs," Joshua said, and they have a better life than they would otherwise.

"A lot of other cities are realizing the benefits of urban chickens and allowing it," he said, adding the city can control chickens and their living situations through licensing.

Jolene Patterson, 638 N. Milwaukee St., noted that there was a chicken coop at her house because "way back when, we used to be able to have them."

"This great city has allowed us to have a community garden, aquaponics and bees," she said, and allowing chickens would add to the city's reputation as a place where sustainable food production thrives.

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Dan Weltin said that giving residents the chance to raise chickens would provide an opportunity for youngsters to learn respect for animals as well as teach them about the origins of their food.

It would also allow people who want to raise hens to follow their dream, he said, noting he and his wife will otherwise be forced to leave the city to do this.

It's not as if there will be chickens in every neighborhood, said Mary Boyle, 418 Hillcrest Ct.

"This isn't going to create chicken Armageddon in Port Washington," she said. "I would be shocked if more than 10 people did this.

"I really hope you give us a chance. It's not unusual today."

But aldermen were cool to the idea, with four of them saying they received overwhelmingly negative feedback from constituents.

"I've gotten a lot of calls on this," Ald. Dan Becker said. "I had constituents tell me to leave it alone."

He and Ald. Dave Larson said they had a resident tell them of living next to someone who illegally had chickens and the problems that resulted, including noise and rodents attracted to the hens.

Larson added that his parents have six chickens on a hobby farm and, when he told them the city was contemplating an ordinance allowing chickens, "they laughed at me," he said. "They said they would hate to live next door to them in a city."

Ald. Mike Ehrlich said he received eight calls from people adamantly opposed to the idea and only one for it.

"That concerns me," he said, adding that the only way he would vote for an ordinance allowing chickens would be if they were housed on larger lots in the city — lots that are likely to be in parts of the city zoned for agriculture, where chickens are already allowed.

There are 10 or 11 areas zoned for agriculture, Ald. Doug Biggs said, reiterating that he, too, received a significant amount of negative feedback.

Biggs also questioned the fiscal wisdom of continuing the discussion, noting that it costs the city money to have ordinances drafted and approved.

"We spent thousands of dollars to get (the beekeeping) ordinance through," he said, and only one person has applied to keep bees.

"As a steward of the finances of the city, I think this needs to be mentioned and discussed."

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But Vollmar noted that the beekeeping ordinance was written by a local resident and considered by aldermen, saving the city a significant amount of money.

He suggested that people who support urban chickens bring an ordinance forward for the city to consider.

Ald. Paul Neumyer suggested the city consider a measure like the one adopted last year in Wauwatosa, which will be in effect for one year.

“I think this is do-able, but it needs to be very structured — structured to meet our needs,” he said.