

Pitted against rules

Monette asks province to revamp law to allow fines for non-violent first offences

Orleans Coun. Bob Monette might not be the flashiest politician on city council, but when it comes to turning to common sense to help his residents, Monette rises to the top.

Monette has written to the province about exploring a more humane and financially effective way of dealing with non-muzzled or unleashed pit bulls.

His letter is in response to a resident's complaint about a non-muzzled pit bull being loose in the neighbourhood.

The way the system works now, a warning can be issued by the city, but the only other option they have is to charge the owners and issue a summons to appear in court.

That can result in a lengthy and expensive process and once the court process is ini-

tiated, things take on a life of their own.

If the judge decides the Dog Owner's Liability Act has been broken — and that can mean anything from a non-muzzled or unleashed dog to a vicious attack — the dog must be put down.

The act itself doesn't provide any other option.

Monette believes there should be some deterrent to pet owners who are simply negligent. A fine, he believes, would be far more effective — and more humane to the dog whose only mistake is having irresponsible owners.

"The only enforcement mechanism available for violations of such requirements as the wearing of a muzzle, for example, will result, upon conviction, in a mandatory order to destroy the dog in question.

"This is a very extreme punitive measure in cases where a monetary, out-of-court settlement would be more appropriate and efficient, particularly in the case of a non-violent first offence," Monette wrote in a letter sent this week.

Monette is looking for changes to the Dog Owners' Liability Act, specifically where it refers to the pit bull controls. Fines would avoid lengthy court costs, along with the "lengthy and costly holding periods of dogs, and, upon conviction, certain euthanasia of family pets."

Monette isn't standing on a soapbox like some politicians, calling for radical, headline-grabbing change.

Instead, he's looking for a solution to solve a real problem to the benefit of everyone.

"We should be able to give them a fine of some sort. And if that doesn't work, then we can give them a summons.

The courts are overloaded as it is. If it's a vicious dog, then you do that. But if it's just a matter of a dog getting loose, a fine would be a more common sense approach.

"Really, it's the owner that's not being responsible. If you have to go to court, the action is to put the dog down. Why should the dog be put down because the owner isn't responsible? It should be a warning or a fine," he said.

Halfway point

His efforts have the backing of the city's bylaw services, which agree there's a better way of dealing with non-muzzled or unleashed pit bulls other than having them put down.

"He came to us, and good for him," said Christine Hartig, the city's project policy officer with bylaw, and also president of the Animal Shelter Administrators of Ontario.

Hartig said it makes good sense to find a halfway point

between giving owners a warning and putting the dogs down.

Ontario is the first province or state in North America to ban pit bulls.

The law meant existing pit bulls had to be neutered or spayed, and leashed and muzzled in public as of 60 days after the legislation is proclaimed.

Pit bulls born 90 days after the law was proclaimed will have to find a home outside the province or be put down.

The ban applies to pit bull terriers, Staffordshire bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, American pit bull terriers and other dogs that are similar in appearance and physical characteristics.

Municipalities are responsible for enforcing the law and identifying banned dogs.

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