

Salem's chicken ban faces debate

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A ban against chickens in residential zones has ruffled some feathers with a determined group of Salem city dwellers.

"A lot of people want to get back to basics, have some control of their own food, have some educational opportunities for their kids and raise their own organic food and save money in this economic crisis," said Salem resident Barbara Palermo, a member of Chickens in the Yard, or CITY.



Lori Cain | Statesman Journal
Ron and Linda Hays raise six chickens on their property in rural Marion County. The couple supports an effort to loosen restrictions on having chickens in Salem's residential zones.

The roughly 60-member group wants Salem City Council to do away with the ban and allow as many as five backyard hens — no roosters — in the city as pets, for their eggs and as a natural extension of their gardens.

Last week, some members took their case before the council, saying that allowing residents to keep chickens would give them a chance to raise their own food during difficult economic times.

They also explained how chickens do not decrease property values, increase methane emissions, threaten public health or pose a public nuisance.

"I have dogs, and I have chickens, and I can tell you that my chickens are much less noisy than my dogs, and a lot cleaner," said Ron Hays, the director of Marion-Polk Food Share, who raises chickens at his home in rural Marion County.

"I know what goes into my eggs," he said. "And when I have extras, I give them to people who need them. It just makes sense."

Though he's not a member of the group, Hays — who owns four Rhode Island chickens and two araucana chickens — was one of the people who spoke in favor of backyard chickens at last week's council meeting.

CITY members attended the meeting armed with an arsenal of information and letters from poultry experts and officials in towns that allow chickens in their cities, including Portland, Denver, Fort Collins, Colo., and Boise, Idaho.

In his letter, Professor Joe Bowersox, director of the Center for Sustainable Communities at Willamette University wrote: "3 hens can lay an average of 2 eggs per day ... these eggs can provide a valuable and economical source of protein to families."

The idea of owning chickens in the city may not be as far-fetched as some may think.

Scrambling to get the issue on a future council agenda, members went out and collected more than 500 signatures on a petition.

They already have the support of Marion-Polk Food Share, the Center for Sustainable

Communities at Willamette University, Oregon Tilth, St. Vincent de Paul Society, as well as several neighborhood associations.

Members hope to have the chicken issue on the council's agenda later this month. Two councilors have agreed to work on a motion to put it on the agenda.

One of those is Councilor Brad Nanke, who supports the issue.

"I collect eggs from chickens a friend of mine owns out in the county," he said. "The chickens don't make much noise, they don't have an odor and they make food."

Salem city code prohibits keeping livestock and fowl within city limits except for areas zoned Residential-Agricultural, said Vicki Hardin Woods, director of the city's Community Development Department.

Those areas involve primarily larger lots located on the outer perimeters of the city, mostly on the west and south sides, she said.

"If a change were to be approved, it's likely it would be a change to a zoning code," Woods explained.

Salem City Manager Linda Norris said her office has not been asked by the council to conduct research of ordinances in other towns that allow chickens inside city limits.

"It's not something we have any direction on right now, so we're not working on it and it's not currently a priority," Norris said. "Our priority right now is putting together our budget for the next fiscal year, and the reorganization and reduction of services that we're going through."

The request to allow residents to have chickens in the city is not a novel one.

In 2006, a handful of residents asked the council to make zoning changes to make it OK to raise chickens and ducks inside Salem city limits.

City staff opposed it, but councilors asked them to look into the possibility of loosening the regulations.

At the time, the staff's biggest concern was the issue of enforcement after the city received more than 100 complaints about domestic fowl, mostly roosters and hens, Norris said.

"But I thought this group presented a compelling case," she said, "and it's going to be up to the council to see if they want to direct us to go forward."

That's a pecking order Palermo can live with.

"We are organized, professional, serious and determined," she said. "We will not stop until the city of Salem joins the urban chicken movement, just as hundreds of cities across the country have already done."

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