

Montgomery County Council weighs dog tethering legislation

Members want to protect pets without burdening owners

by Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer

A County Council committee is considering restrictions on the tethering of dogs, as it looks to protect pets from injury and extreme weather without asking too much of their owners.

Earlier this month, Public Safety Committee members said a regulation proposed by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) went too far by requiring that a person be outdoors and within sight of a tied-up dog at all times.

Instead, the committee is looking at other options to reduce the risk of a dog becoming entangled and injured or frustrated and aggressive because of the manner in which and length of time it has been restrained.

One option would require a person to be home and monitoring any dog that is tethered. Council legislative analyst Susan Farag said if that option is chosen, an overnight tethering ban, already in effect from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., should be extended to 8 p.m. to 8 a.m.

Other options that council staff suggested include setting a time limit of 15 minutes to two hours for unsupervised tethering or allowing "temporary tethering" for no longer than it takes to do a quick task such as answering a ring or knock at the door.

Animal Services Director Capt. Michael Wahl of the county police said it would be easier to enforce a requirement that someone be monitoring the dog.

Council staff members also are recommending requiring swivels on both ends of the tether to reduce the risk of the dog being entangled. Neighboring Frederick County already requires the device.

In Gaithersburg, city law already restricts owners from chaining unattended dogs outside. With supervision, dogs may be tethered with a properly fitted harness for a reasonable time, considering weather and time of day.

Dogs in Gaithersburg must be housed in an area where they can stand full height, stretch out and turn around. Outdoor dog houses must provide fresh air and cannot be completely enclosed.

Dog owners watching their pooches play Monday afternoon at the county parks department's Ridge Road dog park in Germantown said they are not concerned about the county adding tougher restrictions on tethering.

"We're not big fans of tying out anyway," said Tyler Sawchyn, as his Great Dane romped with dogs half his size.

Elelbin Urrutia said she ties her dogs outside for a couple hours sometimes, but she keeps an eye on them and is always nearby.

Many communities across the country have enacted measures to reduce tethering for animal well being.

Among at least 24 communities that ban tethering dogs or any animals are Miami; Tucson, Ariz.; and New Orleans.

Lawton enacted its ban about 20 years ago, and it has been well accepted in the community, said Rose Wilson, superintendent for the city's Animal Welfare Division.

If not for the constant influx of new residents at Fort Sill, "I think we'd have 100 percent compliance," Wilson said.

Montgomery County-based animal welfare activist Susan Rich — who, along with the county's Animal Matters Hearing Board, Humane Society of the United States and Montgomery County Humane Society, supports Leggett's efforts to curtail tethering — said she knows that "you can't prevent everything," but that requiring someone to be at home to monitor the dog does not go far enough.

When tethering is allowed, she said, it should be limited to a short period.

"The intent is to alleviate the suffering of dogs who spend most of their life at the end of a chain," Rich said.

Even well-intentioned owners who tie their dogs outside without supervision put them at risk of injury, she said.

Rich said an otherwise well-cared-for dog in her neighborhood could have been injured when his tie line got caught on a step and he could not move out of the hot sun. The dog could have been injured if she hadn't intervened, Rich said.

She also cited the case of a dog whose tether was long enough for him to jump over a fence, but not long enough for him to reach the ground on the other side to avoid death by hanging.

The council committee's chairman, Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, said the panel will give the suggestions more thought before making a recommendation to the full council.

Leggett's proposal also prohibits any tethering or tying of a cat. It does allow dogs to be tethered temporarily if, for example, it is being groomed or receiving veterinary care.