

## Councillor throws support behind backyard hens

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Clandestine Chickens; 'We're paid to come up with clever solutions'

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Laura Berman for Edible Toronto magazine

City Councillor Joe Mihevc is throwing his support behind a local renegade chicken owner who wants all Torontonians to legally enjoy fresh eggs from hens kept on their own property.

"It seems to me that a limited number of chickens, no roosters, and perhaps a licensing piece to it, is something that we want to investigate," the veteran St. Paul's West councillor said yesterday.

"Yes, we do need to do a public health review, and we need to do a review from the point of view of how you would manage this, but we're paid to come up with clever solutions."

Although Mr. Mihevc was initially quoted in media reports as opposing backyard hens, he said he changed his mind after meeting with the chicken activist last Friday.

She has asked to be referred to only as "Toronto Chicken," because she is breaking the municipal code by keeping three chickens -- Clucky, Sally and Hybie -- in her yard to use their eggs.

She started an online petition at [torontochickens.com](http://torontochickens.com) to change the bylaw when she realized her three hens were outlaws after bringing them home a year ago.

Since then, she's become an expert at clandestine chicken-keeping: There are safe houses, should anyone be alerted to the hens; and there's her alias, "Toronto Chicken," under which she's corresponded with Mr. Mihevc.

But that's also given her the leeway to create an elaborate informational Web site about the benefits of backyard chickens, and instructions on how to keep them responsibly in a city setting.

"I'm not trying to change the world," she said. "I just want a bylaw that says that we should be allowed responsible chicken ownership for the purpose of eggs."

Although they can be kept in many cities in North America, and in places even as near as Brampton,

chickens are currently prohibited under Toronto's municipal code.

They are classified as illegal along with hyenas, snakes longer than three metres and other animals that seem obvious to keep out of the city's homes.

Pigeons and rabbits (as well as your run-of-the-mill hamsters, cats, dogs, etc.) are allowed.

Eletta Purdy, manager for Toronto Animal Services, said keeping chickens is a concern because their "noise and odour" might be a nuisance to neighbours.

"There might be significant noise issues if a rooster is involved, and even, depending on the number of chickens, the din would be fairly significant," she said.

"There's also a concern that there might not be enough space for the animals to be properly kept."

Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker (Scarborough Centre) added one more complaint to that list: "Their poop really, really stinks," he said, noting that he regularly gets calls from constituents complaining about the smell emanating from dog or cat droppings left on their neighbours' lawns, "never mind chickens."

"As much as I'm a supporter of all things organic," he said, "if you want organic eggs, it's not that much of a hardship to go to the store."

But after his meeting with Toronto Chicken, Mr. Mihevc say he has become a believer.

"She had a very nice cage, and it was all clean, backyard was very clean and so on, so it was obviously an example of someone who's doing it right," he said.

"No one's looking to put cows or horses in anyone's backyard. Having small quantities of some animals ... I think we need to look at that as a city because from a sustainability perspective, it's a good thing."

Toronto Chicken said she and a few other supporters are working on an information package that they will deliver to councillors individually in the next month, and use the momentum of those such as Mr. Mihevc to try to bring the chickens out of the shadows.

"I saw the chickens," he said. "I saw the light."