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Proposed ordinance would allow backyard chickens

By ED KEMMICK Of The Gazette Staff The Billings Gazette | Posted: Tuesday, May 24, 2011 12:30 am | (73) Comments

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Helena Independent Record Chickens roam a back yard in Helena, where homeowners can have chickens as pets but city codes prohibit them from running at large and the coop can not be within 25 feet of another person's dwelling, according to Mike Maynard with Helena Animal

Control.

More information

For more information about Billings Backyard Hens, a group that is promoting an ordinance that would allow people to raise up to six hens in the city of Billings, call T.J. Wierenga at 371-5161 or write to HensInTheBackyard@hotmail.com.

T.J. Wierenga acknowledges that some people are already keeping chickens in Billings, even though the poultry is prohibited in residential areas.

She said people ask her, “Why not let a sleeping dog lie?” Her answer: “I’d rather pass a law than break one.”

That’s why she and a group of like-minded people are going to the City Zoning Commission next month as the first step in amending city codes to allow people to keep up to six hens in their backyards.

Wierenga said about 15 families are involved in Billings Backyard Hens, which formed six weeks ago. She said she is motivated by the desire to provide her family — she and her husband have two young children — with safe, healthy food.

She is already part of a community garden at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, and she has a garden in her backyard. In a letter to the Zoning Commission, Wierenga said more than 65 percent of major American cities have chicken-keeping ordinances, as do the Montana communities of Missoula, Bozeman, Kalispell, Whitefish, Helena, Livingston and Manhattan.

In most of the places where keeping chickens is allowed, excluding roosters and limiting the number of hens takes care of most of the problems associated with chickens because only the roosters crow and the amount of waste produced by six hens is relatively insignificant.

Before Missoula amended its codes to allow the raising of chickens, there was a long, loud debate over the proposals, with opponents warning of noise and filth.

But since the code was changed late in 2007, “it’s been very smooth sailing,” according to Ed Franceschina, Missoula’s animal control superintendent.

He said 110 permits have been issued since 2007, of which about 75 are active at any one time. His department receives roughly one complaint a month about chickens, and it’s usually because a chicken has gotten out of its coop or yard and is running at large.

“That’s about the extent of it,” he said.

As with the proposed ordinance in Billings, Missoula allows people to have up to six hens.

Wierenga said members of Billings Backyard Hens are working to get the word out about the ordinance and trying to gather information about supplies of chicks, feed and equipment. She said a backyard poultry fancier could get into it with very little expense, though, of course, it is possible to drop a bundle.

“You can build your own or buy Western-style chicken cabins or Victorian, gingerbread-dripping chicken coops,” she said. “It’s whatever fits your landscaping.”

Wierenga provided the city with copies of a proposed chicken ordinance from Great Falls, and the subject will be addressed by the Zoning Commission at 4:30 p.m. on June 7, in City Council chambers in City Hall.

Nicole Cromwell, the city zoning coordinator, said the commission will take testimony on the proposed ordinance and then decide whether to ask the planning staff to draft an ordinance for consideration by the City Council.

Contact Ed Kemmick at ekemmick@billingsgazette.com or 657-1293.

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