

Public urged to give backyard chickens trial a chance

Public urged to give one-year trial a chance

BY GORDON KENT, EDMONTON JOURNAL APRIL 14, 2010

EDMONTON - A pilot project allowing up to 10 Edmonton residents to raise chickens in their backyards shouldn't ruffle anyone's feathers, says one of the people behind the idea.

Ron Berezan of the informal River City Chicken Collective said Tuesday after years of consultation and research that started in 2007 the group asked planning officials in February to approve a one-year chicken trial.

"It's a good step in the direction of food security and a better food system in general," said Berezan, who as the Urban Gardener consults on organic gardening and edible landscaping.

"Some people just love the animals and love having them around. For others, it's about the food protection; others it's a matter of having their kids understand food production."

The group is proposing six to 10 sites with up to six hens each in various communities, along with strict rules for the quality of the coops and the distance from immediate neighbours, who would have to give their approval, he said.

Although poultry and other farm animals are only allowed on land in Edmonton zoned for agriculture, they're asking for an exemption from the city as provided in the bylaw.

"In other parts of Canada it's become a bit of a battle in public ... We have taken a more collaborative approach with the city administration," Berezan said.

A Calgary activist fined last month for raising chickens planned a court challenge to the law until the ticket was cancelled and the city agreed to look at a similar study.

Backyard chickens are already permitted in Vancouver, Victoria, New York City and Los Angeles, Berezan said.

"We have evolved with these creatures for hundreds and hundreds of years. This is a part of human heritage."

A volunteer advisory committee that includes egg and chicken producers has agreed to monitor the Edmonton experiment, which Berezan hopes will provide information useful in other places dealing with this issue.

He estimated a homemade coop would cost less than \$100, while chicks can be purchased for a few dollars each.

On average, three chickens produce two eggs a day in the course of a year, he said. The poultry

wouldn't be raised for meat.

The regular cleaning and animal-proof feed containers required under their proposal should eliminate smell and pest problems, while hens -- no crowing roosters allowed -- are generally quiet, he said.

There won't be the complications seen in larger rural operations that have hundreds or thousands of birds, he said.

"I don't want this to be something people down the road thoughtlessly move into," said Berezan, who won't be able to take part in the study himself.

"The people I know who keep chickens in other cities suggest the amount of work is much less than keeping dogs and cats."

City complaints and investigations director John Wilson has said he's looking closely at the application and will make a decision within months.

But retired Bentley farmer Darrell Carrigan is skeptical the idea will catch on.

He and his wife had about 100 chickens for their own use, and found that after feeding, cleaning the hen house, building and maintaining pens, and other chores their only "profit" was the eggs they used themselves.

"I really cannot see urban folks raising a few chickens for their own use (as) a practical endeavour. I'm sure after a few months most people will say, 'To heck with this,' " he wrote in an e-mail.

"Don't forget, it's an everyday chore in all kinds of weather year round. The chickens just don't sit and wait until their people come home from their holiday or whatever to be fed and watered."

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