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Residents working to change Wilmette's backyard chicken ban



By John P. Huston TribLocal reporter June 7 at 12:34 p.m.

A recent rewrite of Wilmette's animal code made it explicitly illegal to raise egg-bearing chickens, but a group of residents is clucking foul.

"Sustainable urban agriculture" has been an increasing trend in recent years. Martha Stewart devoted an episode of her television show to the practice of keeping backyard chickens. Chicago allows the practice, and Milwaukee is considering it.

In the northern suburbs, Evanston reversed its ordinance last year to permit up to 20 residents to raise hens. To Wilmette's north, Winnetka allows the practice, as well.

"That's Winnetka. If they can do it, why can't we do it?" said Diane Schaffner, a Wilmette resident and organic gardener who is working to convince her town's trustees to amend the animal control law.

"So far, I've spoken to two board members and it's been very well-received," Schaffner said. "I haven't spoken to everyone yet, but I'm feeling very optimistic."

The village board recently updated its animal control ordinance, primarily to ban dangerous exotic animals and prohibit feral cat colonies. During its discussion, trustees appeared amenable to revisiting the law to address chickens.

"If we've overreached with the chickens, we should go back and fix it," said trustee Cameron Krueger, who chaired the village's judiciary committee that crafted the new animal ordinance.

In an email, however, Village President Chris Canning said he didn't feel there was support from trustees or residents for the judiciary committee to review the amended animal ordinance with respect to chickens.

"I believe that the overwhelming majority of Wilmette residents believe that mixing agricultural uses (like keeping livestock, including chickens) with suburban residences is not in keeping with the spirit and intent of Wilmette's land use regulations," Canning wrote.

Evanston saw hen-raising residents come out of the woodwork as its council debated whether to allow the practice.

And though Evanston's ban was lifted in the fall, only six residents have permits to raise chickens on their property, said Carl Caneva, of the Evanston Health Department. When the council changed the law last year, they allowed a maximum of 20 permits, which cost \$50 annually.

"We're well below that line," Caneva said.

And since the ban was lifted, there have been no complaints, he said.

"It's been very smooth," Caneva said.

From a nutritional perspective, Schaffner argues that eggs from a local hen are better than those from the supermarket.

"The most obvious benefit is having your own very fresh eggs," she said. "You're controlling what the chickens eat, how they live. Each different breed produces a different kind of egg."

If the local ordinance is changed, Schaffner said she'd be eager to acquire two or three hens.

"My yard is pretty small, but I would have a minimum of two," Schaffner said. "It's not recommended that you only have one. Chickens are very social and would benefit from the company."