

Seeking a political coop

BY PATRICK DARE, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 28, 2008



The urban chicken movement is gaining popularity, with residents in Ottawa and across the country becoming more interested in keeping hens for eggs.

Photograph by: Brett Gundlock, Canwest News Service , Brett Gundlock, Canwest News Service

OTTAWA — At a time when food is shipped to our grocery stores all the way from other continents, some Canadians, including Ottawans, are advocating a small step toward food self-sufficiency: Allowing hens in the city.

It's an idea that has taken flight in British Columbia, where about 13 municipalities have allowed urban chickens, minus the added noisy complication of roosters.

The idea is to permit residents to have at least two hens so they can produce daily eggs, adding to the area supply of healthy food and connecting people with a food source other than a big-box store. Advocates in the urban-chicken movement say chicken manure is rich in nutrients and great for the garden after being composted with yard and kitchen waste. Some say chickens are even a great way to cut the grass without a mower.

In the fall, the municipality of Esquimalt, B.C., approved a change to its bylaws to allow residents to have up to four hens laying eggs for household consumption.

Jane Sterk, the B.C. Green party leader who pushed for the move while on her village council, said the change is a recognition that the community has drifted away from food self-sufficiency. She says that 25 years ago, 85 per cent of Vancouver Island's food was produced locally, but today it's less than 10 per cent.

There was initially some opposition to the change, mostly because people were concerned about rats

and raccoons being attracted to chicken coops. But municipal officials visited some properties where people already had hens illegally and were impressed by the cleanliness of the operations. The new municipal rules require that coops be kept tidy so as not to attract pests. No roosters are allowed.

In Victoria, the municipality has allowed chickens “for personal use” since 1992, also with a prohibition on roosters. Victoria spokeswoman Katie Josephson says there aren’t a lot of chicken coops in the urban area, but the city wants to encourage area food production and in the past year has had no complaints about dirty coops or pests. She says the biggest problem with chickens is when they fly the coop and the city’s animal control officers have to round them up. Chicken owners have to pay a \$6 pound fee and \$2.50 for each day the bird is in municipal custody.

Closer to home, chickens are considered livestock and not permitted by the City of Ottawa in the urban area.

The idea of urban chickens surfaced in Ottawa last summer, when Capital Ward Councillor Clive Doucet heard some Glebe residents talking about it at a street party.

The residents, including Penny Becklumb and three girls, aged nine to 11, said having chickens is a fine way to pursue sustainable living and get in touch with the natural world, as long as the coop is well-constructed and kept clean.

Ms. Becklumb says such an enterprise is a serious project and would require a winterized coop, a heat lamp, laying boxes and strong wire to protect the hens from cats and raccoons. But she says chickens are a wonderful way to dispose of kitchen scraps and show children how the natural food cycle operates.

Ms. Becklumb only wants to pursue the matter if there is community support, so she and the girls made a presentation to the Glebe Community Association in October. The association has since invited public feedback. Ms. Becklumb is planning to attend the association’s Jan. 27 meeting to find out what the reaction has been. But she’s already received a letter from a man in his 60s who fondly recalls collecting eggs from hens in the Glebe during the 1950s, when the animals were permitted and when live animals for sale were a common sight in the ByWard Market.

The prospective Glebe chicken-coop operators have the support of Mr. Doucet, who cautions that building and maintaining such an operation is serious business, but notes that the prohibition against keeping such animals is a fairly recent change in cities.

“We’ve become disconnected from our food sources,” said Mr. Doucet. “I think it’s a great idea. I’m all for chickens.”

Cumberland Councillor Rob Jellett, who is chairman of the rural affairs committee, says he’s not so sure the experiment would work. He notes that there were problems in Halifax with a chicken coop in a residential area that drew rats and there are other issues such as noise and how the animals would be slaughtered.

Mr. Jellett is not alone in his skepticism.

In Kamloops, B.C., city council is taking a careful look at the urban chicken movement. Bonnie Klohn, a 21-year-old university student, has asked Kamloops council for permission to conduct a pilot project with 32 families that want to keep urban hens. The families would take courses about hen husbandry, public safety, disease prevention and how to build a chicken coop. Each family would keep three hens for six months starting in March.

Ms. Klohn says she was inspired to work in the urban hen movement by two years she spent in France, where she said municipal officials have never outlawed chicken coops and people are much more in tune with their food sources and nature.

Last spring, she was turned down in a first request to change the law in Kamloops. At a council meeting on Dec. 9, Ms. Klohn had about 40 supporters with her. Council asked for a report and will decide in mid-January whether to allow the pilot project. Ms. Klohn says people think it's a quirky story, but it's an important issue of the legal right to have animals that permit consumption that isn't tied to big corporations and massive international imports.

"People laugh about it. It's something funny to talk about, keeping chickens, but there are a lot of deeper issues to go along with it," said Ms. Klohn.

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