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Toronto Chicken buck-buck-bucking for change

Chickens raised clandestinely in Forest Hill may one day come out of the coop if the city approves an agriculture policy

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VANESSA LU
 CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

Sally, Ayr and Goldie have become a backyard fixture. Trouble is, these hens are not legally entitled to live in their Toronto neighbourhood.

Their owner – who dubs herself Toronto Chicken and documents her experiences with backyard fowl on her website of the same name – didn't know it was illegal to keep chickens in her Forest Hill yard back in 2007, when she first got them. (Only Sally is an original – others have died at the hands of wild animals.)

Keeping chickens is prohibited everywhere in Toronto except on land zoned for agriculture. But it may become legal eventually, with the increasing popularity of locally grown and produced food.

For proponents of urban agriculture, it can't happen soon enough – even big cities like New York and Chicago allow backyard chickens, to varying degrees.

Closer to home, Brampton and Niagara Falls permit them, though Waterloo Region rejected the idea this spring. Vancouver has endorsed chickens, with details still to be worked out.

Toronto officials are studying what rules would be needed to keep peace in neighbourhoods that allow chickens, as part of an urban agriculture policy that could include apartment composting and more community gardens in city parks.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Goldie, left, Ayr and Sally scratch out a rather nice existence in the backyard of their owner. In return, the hens lay an egg a day with a "bright, bright orange" yolk.

Animal services, public health and environment office staff are working on it, with recommendations expected this fall.

"While accessibility to a healthy and sustainable supply of eggs, increased soil fertility, pest and weed control are considered benefits to keeping urban chickens, the situation requires further examination," says a staff report considered at the parks and environment committee yesterday.

Ian Aley of Food Cycles, which is planning to farm on 0.2 hectares in Downsview Park this summer, volunteered to run a pilot project for the city.

"Chickens lay eggs all the time," he said. "You would have a source of eggs that were fresh, healthy and on your doorstep."

He said good regulations would include a "no roosters" rule and require that chickens be provided with a coop (to protect them from dogs or raccoons) and kept a certain distance from homes.

"There would need to be enough space, but we believe it can't just be people with big yards," he said, adding it could be a fenced-in area at an apartment building or a city park.

Committee chair Paula Fletcher said it was too soon for a pilot project. "There will no egg production in local backyards just yet."

But that may be ignoring a quiet reality. The owner of Sally, Ayr and Goldie says she doesn't believe she's the only one in Toronto keeping chickens, noting others have contacted her through her website.

"I think the city is being cautious and I think that's good," said Toronto Chicken, a mother of two teen boys. "I think the key thing is to limit the number of chickens allowed.

"We use every single egg that is laid," she said. "They have a delicious flavour, and actually taste a little chickeny." Hens generally lay one egg a day, though production slows in the fall and winter. "The yolk is bright, bright orange. The white holds together really well."

The composted droppings fertilize her vegetable garden, which this year has corn, beans and squash.

While she doesn't worry about a bylaw crackdown, she says she'll "feel a lot better when it's legal."

City officials say there is no set fine for keeping chickens in a residential zone, but that a judge would determine the penalty.

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