

BACKYARD BARNYARDS

Chicken coop for the soul**Vancouver city council delights aficionados by approving plan to allow urban hen houses, but ruffles feathers of poultry association**JANE ARMSTRONG
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VANCOUVER -- They cluck and bob around backyards from New York to Victoria, providing endless hours of delight to their owners, along with a few freshly laid eggs every other day.

Backyard chickens have become the new "it" animal for urbanites striving for simple, sustainable living habits. Now, Vancouver is poised to join the North American wave of affection for all things chicken after city council approved a plan to allow city dwellers to keep the birds in their own backyards.

The plan has thrilled urban hen keepers who say the move will improve the quality of life for people and chickens alike.

"They are so pretty and so cute and they talk to you and follow you around," gushed Heather Havens about her hens Zilla and Cheeks. Ms. Havens's four-year-old birds live in a coop in her backyard in the Vancouver suburb of Surrey, which outlaws chickens in small yards such as Ms. Haven's.

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Ms. Havens has begun lobbying Surrey to make her birds legal.

Urbanites are increasingly drawn to chickens, she said, because they provide a link to simpler times when people knew - and could see - where their food came from. Retrieving an egg from a hen's roost appears to be just the tonic for people craving a closer connection to their natural environment.

While Vancouver is often on the vanguard of urban trends, this time it is following in the footsteps of a score of large U.S. cities that have embraced urban gardens and small livestock.

Portland, Ore., and Seattle have permitted backyard chickens for years. In Portland, there are "coop tours" similar to garden tours, where people can survey the neighbourhood hens and check out the newest chicken gear, including designer coops and hen houses. And Seattle has recently permitted residents to own miniature goats. Small cows might not be far behind.

But even long-time chicken aficionados say there's no precedent to the current chicken craze.

Seattle cancer researcher Paul Farley, who has kept chickens since he was a youngster growing up in the San Francisco area, teaches adult classes on how to care for urban chickens.

"If you had told me 20 years ago that I'd be teaching Poultry 101 to classrooms of 50 people, I wouldn't have believed it," Mr. Farley said. "I was the weirdo for so many years. Now, everyone wants to hear what I have to say about chickens."

Not everyone is enamoured of bringing chickens to city yards. Last year, Halifax banned the birds and they're outlawed in Toronto, too.

The B.C. Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which argued against the bylaw change at Vancouver city council last week, is worried that people will rush out and buy hens without knowing what to feed them, how to care for them if they get sick, and how to build secure chicken coops to protect them from raccoons and coyotes.

Spokesman Geoff Urton said the SPCA has a certification program for farmers who raise chickens according to a set of animal-welfare guidelines. People concerned about where their eggs come from can always purchase these products in stores, a far cheaper alternative to keeping backyard chickens, he said.

The British Columbia Poultry Association has also weighed in, urging Vancouver to reject backyard chickens. Association president Ray Nickel said city chickens could increase the threat of disease such as avian flu. "There are distinct differences between planting an herb garden in your backyard, as opposed to keeping animals," Mr. Nickel said.

"I don't see it as a very rational decision. [The city] is not consulting with agricultural organizations. They seem to consult with small interest groups."

Indeed, West Coast politicians have been more sympathetic to chicken ownership. They are legal in Victoria and several Lower Mainland jurisdictions.

City Councillor Andrea Reimer, who proposed the chicken bylaw change, said the city's food policy council examined the pros and cons of keeping chickens. Anyone who has owned a dog or cat can learn how to care for a chicken, Ms. Reimer said.

Ms. Havens, meanwhile, said keeping chicken isn't about saving money.

"You find yourself making excuses to go out and be with them," she said. "You bring them a treat, or check for eggs, but really, they are just nice to be around."

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