

The Michigan Daily

Backyard chickens approved for Ann Arbor

Residents can have up to four hens, if neighbors approve

By Sara Lynne Thelen

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Ann Arbor resident Susan Blake stepped up to the podium at Tuesday's City Council meeting and made her presence known. "I'm a chicken," she said.

Blake began clucking like an agitated hen to demonstrate the potential noise level of backyard chickens in Ann Arbor. Her squawks bounced off the council chamber walls, reiterating her point as she finished her speech: "I'm against chickens for several reasons, but that's one of them," she said.

Despite some residents' fears of noise, smelly manure, unsightly coops and the avian flu, Ann Arbor City Council voted 7-4 Tuesday to amend an ordinance that previously banned backyard chickens. When the amendment becomes effective in 60 days, Ann Arbor residents will be able to keep up to four hens in coops in their backyards with their neighbors' consent. Chickens could be

kept as pets or for eggs.

"All the jokes are done with, and all the real sustainable living is now underway," said city Councilmember Stephen Kunselman (D-Ward 3), who owns a chicken and first sponsored the ordinance change last December. "It shows that community activism is still alive and well in Ann Arbor."

About 15 residents spoke, joked and broke chicken wishbones in front of the City Council on Tuesday to show their support for the chicken ordinance. Many felt that backyard chickens would provide a healthy and cheap alternative to store-bought eggs and a learning experience for first-time hen owners.

"I want my kids to understand where their food comes from," said Ann Arbor resident Jennifer Hall.

Molly Notarianni, the manager of Ann Arbor's Farmers Market, recently moved to Ann Arbor from Portland, Ore., where backyard chickens are also legal. She said she was not concerned about urban chickens detracting from business at the Farmers Market. She enjoyed keeping chickens when she lived in Oregon because their eggs are delicious and they make affectionate pets, she said.

"I found that they were very quiet. Rather than being divisive, I met a lot of people I wouldn't have otherwise," she said in an interview. "It's a good way to build community. I'm very fortunate and grateful that the city of Ann Arbor has decided that they are important."

Residents who kept backyard chickens before the law was amended would have been fined up to \$500.

Councilmember Leigh Greden (D-Ward 3), who voted against the ordinance change, said he believes legalizing backyard chickens is unnecessary because fresh eggs can be bought at the Farmers Market.

"I believe the potential problems outweigh the very few potential benefits," he said, adding that most of his constituents were against the proposal. "I don't know how anyone can say that this should be something we're spending time on."

Councilmembers Joan Lowenstein (D-Ward 2), Stephen Rapundalo (D-Ward 2) and Chris Easthope (D-Ward 5) also voted against the amendment.

Richard Fulton, an associate professor at Michigan State University specializing in avian diseases, said that many studies on migratory waterfowl throughout the United States have concluded that Michigan's risk for avian flu is low, especially for chickens in small numbers.

"If this disease does come to Michigan, common sense will protect people and their chickens," he said in an e-mail interview. "The chickens at that time should be kept indoors, and they should be kept isolated from other people and animals."

Fulton added that children should not cuddle chickens like they would a dog or a cat.

Kunselman's pet chicken, Bercilia, has been in "political exile" because of the law, he said. But he won't be able to build a coop at his home in Ann Arbor anytime soon.

"The irony is that being a city councilmember is a lot of work," he said. "Maybe we'll bring her home for a weekend or something."