

The Sherbrooke experience

David Chandler

Firstly, I would like to congratulate the organisers of this conference for presenting such a wide range of issues and excellent presentations based on the main theme of urban animal management. I have indeed learned and will have much to consider when I return to Sherbrooke.

I came here to learn. To learn, as a councillor, how to make more informed judgements on this important issue. I came also as a concerned animal owner and citizen, anxious to put all the faces of this debate in perspective in my own mind and to inform my friends and supporters of my conclusions.

My involvement in the issue of domestic animals and their interaction with the community began in 1989 when a councillor proposed to Sherbrooke Council that all cats should be confined 24 hours a day. This was followed by widespread publicity in the local and national media regarding alleged devastation of wildlife by cats. On closer examination these findings appeared to have little substance. As an animal lover I was horrified by the picture being presented to the public at large but as a cat lover I was alarmed by the injustice done to our feline companions in using them as the scapegoat when the real threat to Sherbrooke's lyrebird population is foxes.

I am glad to say that most of the media hype and public hysteria has died down and some of the worst of the rhetoric has been debunked. I note the trenchant criticisms by Ric Natrass of some of these questionable publications in his presentation at this conference.

After a year of very public debate, Sherbrooke Council has discarded the idea of total confinement of cats. Council then decided by a narrow margin to create a local law which included a night curfew, and registration fees which had a price differential for neutered cats. Included with this was a 'Responsible Animal Owners Code of Conduct', currently included as an appendix to the Local Law.

The main emphasis in the past has been to pursue enforcement at all costs, without seriously dealing with the broader long term issue of achieving community acceptance or at least understanding the laws and what they aim to achieve.

There has been some debate over the years as to whether enforcement or education is the 'best way to go', and I propose that an appropriate combination of both - incorporating an emphasis on encouragement, understanding and education, that reserves the enforcement, infringement penalty and court action aspects for repeat or deliberate offenders. Essentially, the proposal is based on being 'fair and reasonable' whenever possible, but pursuing enforcement fully where appropriate.

Proposed changes to the current Sherbrooke Council plans would be:

1. Introduce an infringement notice warning system to operate in accordance with council policy.
2. Ensure staff emphasis is reorientated towards providing a community service rather than emphasising enforcement approaches. This will be achieved by selecting future staff to provide a high level of skill in public relations.
3. Change title from 'Local Laws Officer' to 'Ranger' or similar positive/neutral title to assist with changing the officers' self-perception and the community's perception of the job.
4. Support and promote animal welfare and other education initiatives such as 'Pet Care' programs which emphasise responsible animal ownership (particularly of cats and dogs) in a very positive and constructive way. Attempt to cure the cause of the problems rather than just dealing with the symptoms.
5. Implement a more flexible approach to prioritising areas of work, such as introducing random 'blitzes' for problem dog attacks and continue the community survey of animal ownership to cover all areas over a number of years.

This radically different approach was necessary as council officers considered that enforcement of some of the provisions have proved impractical, too costly and a poor example of community relations. Meaningful benefits will only come from educating our young people and our community at large, animal owners and non-owners alike, to be part of the process of defining and valuing animal ownership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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David Chandler has been a Councillor of the Shire of Sherbrooke, an animal breeder, judge and founder of breeder organisations. He founded the 'Permanent Animal Welfare Study Group' (PAWS) to critically examine statistics and statements regarding animal welfare and management.

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