

Legal Watch

Does cat licensing work? Experts from both sides of the issue weigh in.

Beth Kalet

Posted: Tue Feb 20 00:00:00 PST 2001

New Paltz passed an ordinance in the summer of 1999 "giving us the right to pick up these cats, and either adopt them out or find some place to put them," Nyquist says. The issue drew attention far beyond the town's borders. "It raised a hue and cry," he says.

The town charges no fine; it aims to find homes for adoptable cats or trap, neuter and release those that cannot be adopted. Instead of a blanket approach, it established a policy that allows officials to deal with situations on a case-by-case basis.

New Paltz represents a micro view of what some larger communities fear and face. Organizations like Alley Cat Allies have rallied to the cause. "We believe that the attempt to put laws on the books to solve the overpopulation problem, the problem of lost and free-roaming cats, is misguided. It's tunnel vision thinking," ACA's Robinson says.

The problem is deeper, more complex and should be attacked at its root, she says. "Just putting a law on the books without putting resources into place for people to get their animals vaccinated and vetted and sterilized is just an empty, useless and unenforceable law and does not serve to directly be a solution toward the overpopulation problem," she says.

Robinson cites the success of places like New Hampshire, where a concerted statewide effort to provide low-cost or free neuter clinics, veterinarian services and mandatory neutering for all pets leaving shelters has resulted in a 50 percent reduction in the euthanasia rate during approximately five years. Now may be the time to consider whether licensing will help drop that figure even lower, she says.

Groups like CFA take an active role in their opposition. It is marshaling efforts to fight licensing laws, monitoring areas where licensing laws surface and providing information to city council members. Members make personal visits to back up their research.

The group has undertaken studies that show over time licensing does not reduce the euthanasia rates for cats brought into shelters, Eigenhauser says. He cites a study of five years' worth of related data prepared by the San Diego County Department of Animal Control and the Animal Control Advisory committee as San Diego looked into cat licensing.