



REQUEST FOR DECISION

MEETING DATE: January 15, 2024

TITLE: Responsible Pet Ownership

DIVISION: Community and Protective Services

SUMMARY:

During the 2021 election campaign, Council identified that there were concerns expressed regarding stray cats and limitations in the City's Domestic and Animal Control Bylaw. Council's Strategic Plan refers to "responsible pet ownership" in a general sense; however, the understanding from Administration was specific to cats. Additionally, a request for updated information regarding animal licensing was made. Parameters around hens/bees are being dealt with through other processes that will be brought forward to Council for consideration.

PROPOSED MOTION:

To be determined based on discussion and feedback of Committee. Recommendations and potential options are included further within the Request for Decision.

BACKGROUND / ANALYSIS:

Licensing

The City of Spruce Grove removed the requirement for an annual license in 2016. Rationale provided and supported by Council at that time indicated that any revenue or oversight benefits were minimal.

As part of the City's review for licensing, as well as overall regulations, the City received information and data from the following municipalities: Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat, City of Leduc, City of Lethbridge, Lethbridge County, Parkland County, St. Albert, and Stony Plain.

When it comes to licensing, seven out of the eight municipalities examined use some form of licensing regulations. All communities which licensed animals also required the animal to wear an identification tag when the animal was off property. Animal licensing costs ranged from a low of \$10 to a high of \$525 which depended upon whether the animal was fixed, vaccinated or declared a nuisance, or vicious. Municipalities utilized different licensing methods such as a yearly fee, one-time lifetime fee, online registration and/or in person registration. License renewal notices, where required, were mailed to animal owners in some communities, while others did not conduct follow-up to ensure yearly licensing registration.

Generally speaking, the benefits cited by those that required a license mainly centered around revenue generation. At the same time, most communities stated that licensing expedited the return of the animal to the owner, thereby reducing stress on the animal; however, there was no way of confirming whether the animal return was a result of the identification tag or the license itself.

When the City of Spruce Grove made the decision to remove licensing requirements, a bylaw amendment was also implemented that still required a dog owner to have an identification tag. Enforcement officers are able to charge a dog owner when an animal is located that does not have an identification tag and the animal can be connected to a particular owner. When Administration compared the number of impounded dogs that were returned to their owners between Parkland County, Spruce Grove, and Stony Plain; Spruce Grove had the highest impounded dog to animal owner return rate, despite not requiring dogs to be licensed. Additionally, utilizing license data to reunite dogs with their owner was inefficient in that this data was housed in the Finance (Treasury) department which is not available after hours or on weekends when Enforcement Services officers may require it. In short, licensing does not provide any tangible benefit to enforcement action.

Another component to licensing is the percentage of animals licensed compared to the actual number of animals in a community. This is very difficult to measure and can vary by community. Industry standards and research generally identifies a license to actual animal rate of between 10 - 20 per cent. The last time the City required licenses, there were a total of 2415 dog licenses secured. Again, there is no way to determine how many dogs there actually are; however, Administration is confident that it would be significantly higher than what was realized and would be realized with licensing regulations.

In 2016, the total net financial benefit for licensing was less than \$40,000. This did not account for administrative time. The Finance (Treasury) department would not currently have capacity to manage the billing, payments, and follow-up. The City's software would also need an upgrade as it is not currently accessing the animal licensing module. The administrative resources, both one-time and ongoing, are identified below.

Cats

The consideration of a specific “Cat Bylaw” or the addition/control of cats within the existing bylaw has been contemplated by Council several times over the last decade. In each instance there was not a desire to make any changes.

The following information summarizes the observations from the jurisdictional scan (Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat, Leduc, Lethbridge, St. Albert, Strathcona County/Sherwood Park, Stony Plain, and Spruce Grove):

- Regulation of cats is split evenly. Lethbridge, St. Albert, Strathcona County, and Spruce Grove do not regulate cats and the other four comparators do.
- The largest animal complaint in each municipality relates to dogs with “at large”, attacks, and nuisance being the biggest three.
- Spruce Grove had the third lowest number of dogs “at large” complaints.
- In every municipality, officers do not proactively enforce or pick up stray or roaming cats unless trapped, injured, or in distress.

As mentioned, some municipalities do not regulate cats; however, all regulate dogs. The main rationale for controlling dogs vs. cats relates to public safety. Dogs have a significantly higher rate of attacks/bites in comparison to cats. At the same time, cats can most certainly be a nuisance when roaming off an owner’s property.

In the City of Spruce Grove, the number of complaints related to cats steadily declined each year from 2019 - 2021. A slight increase was seen in 2022; however, this may be attributable to a spike seen across Alberta related to an increase in pet ownership during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Overall, the complaints hovered around 10 per cent of total animal related complaints and less than two per cent of total “assist public” service calls. Similarly, the number of impounded cats related to Spruce Grove has remained consistent from 2019 - 2021. Again, there was a spike in 2022, likely due to the pandemic.

The process currently in the City of Spruce Grove regarding nuisance cats does not include any proactive or reactive enforcement as there is no regulation in place similar to St. Albert, Lethbridge, and Strathcona County. Enforcement Services does loan out traps to residents that express concern over nuisance cats. If an animal is trapped the individual can then take the animal to the Parkland County Animal Shelter and return the trap to the City. The shelter costs associated with animals deemed to have originated from Spruce Grove are borne by the City. Where an owner can be identified, the City looks to recoup the costs associated with the shelter.

Traditionally, dog owners have a high rate of reunification (90 per cent +) and overall desire to locate and have their dogs returned. The same cannot be said for cats. Owners that allow cats to be “outdoor cats” generally do not take the time to locate and be reunited with their cats in the event they are lost and/or impounded. In the jurisdictional scan, the overall number of

impounded cats is very similar, albeit slightly higher in municipalities that regulate cats. At the same time, the reunification numbers for impounded cats does not vary greatly between those that regulate cats and those that do not. The average sits at 26 per cent.

Additionally, cats also have higher veterinarian bills (spay/neuter/illness), longer stays due to reduced ownership claims, and lower adoption rates. As such, cats that have been impounded carry higher costs to the City both from the standpoint of higher veterinarian bills and lack of reunification with owners.

When provided, all feedback Administration has received, both in terms of data and discussions with enforcement counterparts, indicates that the introduction of a bylaw to regulate cats will lead to higher costs for cats at the shelter billed to the City and higher workloads but no appreciable increase in owners' behaviour/compliance or re-unification.

As an example, in 2022 the City spent approximately \$30,000 on veterinarian and impound charges for animals. Of this amount, 92 per cent (approximately \$27,500) related to cats with the remaining applicable to dogs. As mentioned, the majority of the dog fees were recoverable from the owner with minimal fees recovered regarding cats.

In following up with those municipalities that do regulate cats, no proactive enforcement is being completed. When a complaint is received, the consistent procedure is to inform the resident that they can pick up a cat trap, free of charge (with deposit in case of damage) and attempt to trap the cat that appears to be the subject of their complaint. Officers are still required to create a file, meet the complainant for the trap pickup, and provide any additional information to them. If an animal is trapped, the individual then contacts an officer who will come pick up the animal and take it to the local shelter for processing.

This process is similar to what the City does, except that the onus is on the resident to transport the trapped animal to the shelter and return the trap to the City. As mentioned, four jurisdictions take the same approach as the City and the other four follow the approach identified above. It is estimated that the enhanced level of service provided by the four municipalities would require an estimated three additional officer hours per complaint/animal.

Over the last several years the average number of cats impounded is approximately 100. This would be the result of citizen trapping the animal and taking it to the shelter themselves. Administration believes this would increase if the responsibility to pick up and transport cats fell to Enforcement Services. There is no way of knowing how much of an increase the City would see but it is reasonable to estimate a 50 per cent increase. Therefore, the increased service level required to regulate cats would require between 300 - 450 hours of officer time (approximately 0.25 FTE). This would be in addition to a 50 per cent increase in impound fees.

OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES:

Other Considerations

1. The City is currently working through program details regarding hen/bees. As such, separate regulations and parameters of those programs will be identified at a later date. Once those programs are finalized and move forward, a small amendment to the existing bylaw will be required making reference to those programs/processes.
2. The existing bylaw(s) has ambiguity regarding other animals that are kept as pets. These include, but are not limited to, goats, pigs, horses, etc. Clarity is needed regarding Council's desire to allow or disallow these type of animals kept as pets. The Bylaw would then be updated to remove any ambiguity. Of the jurisdictions studied (not including the City of Spruce Grove), two municipalities allow for these types of animals, if domesticated as household pets, and five do not (unless the Land Use Bylaw allows).
3. Is there a desire to update the name of the bylaw to "Responsible Pet Ownership" to align with modern language that is more common in other jurisdictions?

When it comes to licensing, Administration would not recommend re-introducing a licensing program for the following reasons:

1. The City has comparable or higher rates of re-unification without licensing and no additional benefits in this regard would be achieved by doing so. Similarly, licensing does not provide any benefit to enforcement action.
2. The actual number of animals in our community is significantly higher than what would be realized with licensing provisions. This is something that is not unique to the City and resources to make inroads or improvements over other jurisdictions would be cost prohibitive.
3. For complete transparency, the only tangible benefit from animal licensing is revenue generation. At the same time, even when accounting for growth since 2016, the estimated net revenue would be negligible considering the need to add software and human resources to implement and manage a license program. This remains the case if cats were also licensed. If/when the City achieves a certain size where economies of scale could be realized in managing the program, this could always be revisited.

When it comes to cats, Administration believes the current approach by the City remains reasonable when considering its consistency with other jurisdictions in terms of applicability, the small percentage of complaints received, and the unlikely desired behaviour change of cat owners. In short, when comparing data and officer analysis across jurisdictions there does not appear to be any benefit when comparing municipalities that regulate cats to those that do not.

Should Council wish to proceed with regulating cats the number of hours spent by officers would be taken from other priorities or consideration would need to be given to hiring a 0.5 or

1.0 FTE that would also increase overall capacity with existing or new priorities (i.e., Community Standards Bylaw).

An Animal License module is available that could be added to CityView. The license registration/application and payment could then be handled simultaneously online.

Recommendations and/or options:

1. Administration recommends continuing with its existing practice of not licensing animals. Should Committee feel otherwise, there is an option to provide a motion directing such. An example may be:

THAT Administration be directed to bring to Council for consideration an implementation plan to introduce licensing provisions for animals.

2. Administration recommends continuing with the existing practice of not regulating cats in the City of Spruce Grove. Should Committee feel otherwise, there is an option to provide a motion directing such. An example may be:

THAT Administration be directed to bring to Council for consideration amendments to the Dog and Domestic Animal Control Bylaw to regulate cats in the City of Spruce Grove.

3. Administration recommends changing the name of the existing bylaw to “Responsible Pet Ownership”. The proposed motion to bring this to effect is:

THAT Administration be directed to bring to Council for consideration amendments to the Dog and Domestic Animal Control Bylaw to amend its title to Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw.

4. Administration would like to add clarity in our bylaw regarding “livestock” type animals normally defined as examples like pigs, goats, horses, etc. The question for Committee is the desire to allow or not allow such animals. Possible options for motions include:

THAT Administration be directed to bring to Council for consideration amendments to the Dog and Domestic Animal Control Bylaw to clearly define and prohibit livestock animals in the City of Spruce Grove except where allowed under the Land Use Bylaw.

or

THAT Administration be directed to bring to Council for consideration amendments to the Dog and Domestic Animal Control Bylaw to clearly define and allow for livestock animals within the City of Spruce Grove if said animals are domesticated household pets.

CONSULTATION / ENGAGEMENT:

In preparation for this report, the City consulted both internally with several departments (Planning, Finance, Protective Services, etc.) as well as the municipalities identified in this report.

Further analysis or consultation on possible changes would depend on any direction/feedback from Committee.

IMPLEMENTATION / COMMUNICATION:

Implementation/communication would also be largely dependent on whether there was direction provided to Administration on bringing any items discussed forward for Council's further consideration.

At the same time, one observation that Administration recognized in their analysis was that even in jurisdictions where cats were not regulated a great deal more proactive and detailed information was available for residents on both being a responsible pet owner and also on how residents could deal with nuisance animals. As such, even if there was not a desire for any changes in regulations, Administration will be looking at significantly increasing the information and communication available to residents.

IMPACTS:

From a licensing perspective, the following has been identified:

- Initial set-up of CityView module would require in-house staffing resources from Finance, Planning, Information Services, Protective Services, and Communications.
- Initial set-up is very resource heavy. Currently, it is estimated that resourcing requirements for CityView are able to accommodate three "projects" per year. Four are currently planned for 2024 and others already planned for 2025. These are difficult to manage with external resources as subject matter experts and administrators of said program(s) must be involved in the set-up. Some of the planned projects would need to be deferred if there was a desire to prioritize animal licensing.
- If resources are dedicated to the initiative, it is estimated to take approximately 3 - 5 months for complete set-up, testing, communications, and roll out.
- There is also an estimated 100 - 200 annual ongoing administrative hours required to implement a licensing program.

From a "cats regulation" perspective, the following has been identified:

- Regulating cats would be an increased service level with unlikely or unknown behaviour improvement/compliance.
- Estimated 300 - 450 hours of additional Enforcement Services officer time.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

In addition to the 100 - 200 hours of administrative time for licensing and the 300 - 450 hours of enforcement time, the following estimated costs have been identified:

- The previous animal licensing program for the City generated revenue of approximately \$40,000 annually which would translate to roughly \$50,000 in 2023 accounting for inflation.
- The animal licensing module for CityView currently costs \$58,578 (one time) and has an annual support fee of \$3,805.
- An estimated increase of \$15,000 annually for impound fees if cats were regulated.