

Pet-spaying laws make good sense

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In a decision that's sure to set the fur flying, North Saanich council has passed a bylaw requiring domestic cats to be spayed. It's the first such ordinance in the region, but depending on public response, it might not be the last. Other local municipalities are considering a similar measure.

On its face, the new bylaw looks like it means business. All cats over the age of five months must be neutered, unless they belong to a registered breeder. There's an exemption for animals with health problems that preclude surgery.

Any owner whose cat is brought to the pound must agree to have it neutered before the animal will be returned. A fine of \$200 is anticipated for non-compliance with the bylaw.

However Mayor Ted Daly is talking a softer line. Council's purpose for now, he insists, is largely educational. There's no expectation that bylaw enforcement staff will scour country lanes for unspayed pets.

Since large numbers of people-- make that municipal voters -- are animal lovers, that might be wise. Who can forget the uproar when the Capital Health Region announced a campaign to shoot rabbits on the grounds of Victoria General Hospital or the ruckus that followed last year's decision to cull seals that were eating young salmon in the Puntledge River? When it comes to animal control, there's a huge gulf in our community between those with soft hearts and those with hard heads.

A small group of citizens has taken up the challenge of bridging that gulf. Calling themselves the Spay/Neuter Bylaw Action Committee, they've made presentations to local councils. Their lobbying convinced North Saanich to proceed.

The case they make is compelling. Local animal shelters are full to overflowing. Every year, more unwanted cats are dumped by their owners and left to fend for themselves in alleys and hedgerows.

No one knows exactly how many feral cats now live on the Saanich Peninsula, but there could be several thousand. They eke out short and difficult lives by preying on local wildlife.

U.S.-based studies show that domestic and feral cats are the second leading cause of a continent-wide collapse in songbird numbers (collisions with windows, cars and power lines are the primary cause). Worldwide, it's believed the domestic cat is responsible for the extinction of more bird species than any other threat.

But while the problem is clear, convincing the public to accept mandatory spaying might be a tall order. Earlier efforts to get a similar bylaw passed for dogs fell apart in the face of opposition from owners and breeders.

Unfortunately, other solutions are even more problematic. The chief veterinarian for the B.C. SPCA, Dr. James Lawson, addressed the issue in a speech last year.

Once unspayed cats are dumped outside and a population of feral cats grows up, it becomes almost impossible to control its numbers without an extermination campaign, which no one supports, he said.

Some local authorities have tried trapping stray cats, neutering them and releasing them again. But unless 90 per cent are caught and spayed, there is no impact. And that's a hopelessly unrealistic target.

Lawson also criticized volunteers who build shelters and feeding stations for feral cats. While their actions are well-meant, feeding "these poor wretched souls ... without sterilization and vaccination is not helping."

The only way to solve the problem is not to let it happen in the first place. Of course, that's the intent of the North Saanich bylaw.

In such an emotional matter, good intentions are not enough. It will take a serious program of public education to win the hearts and minds of cat owners.

The mayor and council should be commended for bringing an important issue to our attention. But they still have a lot of convincing to do.

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