

Town staff will report on allowing backyard hens

By Bill Rea

There's support, both in the community and at the Caledon council table, for allowing residents to keep chickens in their backyards, but the Town is going to be conducting a process to see it's appropriate.

Councillors, sitting in committee, made that decision Tuesday after a lengthy discussion, and after hearing from a Mono Mills parent who's strongly in favour of the idea.

The matter appeared in Tuesday's agenda as a notice of motion from Councillor Jennifer Innis, who had pointed out the Town's Animal Control Bylaw prohibits the keeping hens on residential properties. Her motion called for the bylaw to be amended to allow for up to six backyard hens on properties at least half an acre in size, and that staff be directed to come up with regulations and a licensing program.

The motion saw a couple of changes before it was passed by committee.

Councillor Nick deBoer successfully put forth an amendment calling on Town staff to provide a report on the matter, complete with recommendations. Councillor Rob Mezzapelli argued for something broader, so the lot size provisions were dropped from the final motion.

There are a number of benefits to having hens in private backyards, and Tammie Krick stressed them for councillors, as well as trying to dispel some myths she said exist on the topic.

She also appeared before councillors armed with petitions of support with more than 300 signatures.

She said backyard hens are already allowed in a number of municipal jurisdictions, including Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, New York City and Los Angeles.

'We view chickens as pets, the same as cats and dogs,' she declared.

Krick said her two young daughters, Cameron, 11, and Maia, 6, had asked for chickens for Christmas last year. She told councillors she checked with the Town, and was told there, shouldn't be an issue, provided the neighbours didn't complain. The girls received some of the equipment they needed to raise the birds, the family built a coop in the backyard and welcomed chicks into the family in April.

In July, they heard from the Town's bylaw officials that neighbours had expressed concerns the birds were attracting wildlife. She pointed out their property backs onto Glen Haffy Conservation Area, where there's already lots of wildlife.

Krick said raising the birds has been an educational experience for her daughters.

She also challenged some of the myths, stating hens don't make much noise, saying the sound they make after laying an egg is comparable to an adult in conversation.

She also said they don't necessarily give off an unpleasant smell.

'All animals have a distinct odour, including people,' she remarked, adding any animal will smell if it's not properly cared for.

Responsible pet ownership comes into play, she said.

She also said chickens do not produce a lot of excrement, compared to dogs, and what they produce is high in nitrogen and can be used as fertilizer. Krick added there's little chance of something like avian flu coming from a small and well-maintained flock.

As well, she stressed the value of the birds as pets.

'They have names and are part of our family,' she remarked.

There are also nutritional benefits from the eggs they lay.

Councillor Gord McClure was very concerned about the possible spread of illness in birds from such an operation. He said the last person a chicken farmer wants to see on his land is another chicken farmer, because they don't know what they're bringing with them.

'I am very much against this, and every chicken farmer in town would be,' he declared.

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy commented that a chicken will lay eggs for one or two years, but will live several years after that.

'They're pets with benefits,' Krick replied.

Shaughnessy said this sounded like a 'feel-good' story, but she was concerned about unforeseen consequences.

She added the birds might be regarded as pets, but said the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) would regard them as livestock. There would have to be adjustments to the Town's zoning bylaws to permit them in residential areas.

'It is a complex issue,' she observed. 'I think we have to be very careful on how this is done.'

Town staff had suggested earlier this year a one-year pilot project be set up to allow hens in five residential backyards, but council

didn't go along with it. Mezzapelli said he had voted against it because it only involved properties that were at least one acre. That would have kept the activity out of most urban areas, where he said there would be more education value. He pointed out that allowing hens on half-acre lots would mean it wouldn't be permitted in most of Bolton.

Tuesday's agenda package included a letter from Davis Feed and Farm Supply supporting backyard chickens, and even offering to host workshops on how to properly care for the birds.

"We believe it would be an asset for residents to have the ability to learn about agriculture in their own backyard and the opportunity to produce food for themselves," Sean Davis wrote.

Councillor Johanna Downey was in favour of looking into this more, commenting more than 300 signatures on a petition in Caledon is significant.

"I think that speaks volumes," she remarked.