

Urban fowl will help Missoula live up to title of ‘Garden City’

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By Paul Hubbard

Missoula is on the brink of taking one step closer towards its moniker, its rich past and promising future: “The Garden City.” On Monday, December 17, City Council will vote on whether to legalize chickens in the city limits. The conversation has heated up within the Council and city at large, and for good reason. Who wants to live in a smelly, noisy, filthy city? Not me. But small flocks of backyard hen chickens do not mean piles of manure, crowing roosters, or disease-ridden neighborhoods. Instead, they offer fresh eggs, fertile garden beds, increased self-sufficiency, and hours of cheap entertainment.

A few City Council members, the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition (CFAC), and the departments of Animal Control and Environmental Health convened to draft an amendment that would allow small flocks of backyard chickens, while preempting a multitude of potential pitfalls. We researched over 20 other chicken-friendly cities—most of which are bigger and denser than Missoula—to learn about how their ordinances were working. Then, we created a number of straightforward conditions that ensure urban chickens will not create a nuisance to neighbors and communities.

The most proactive conditions simply prohibit roosters and limit the number of hens to six, which essentially removes the risk of obnoxious noises and smells. The other stipulations mandate a 20-foot buffer zone between the chicken coop and neighboring dwellings, outdoor access to a fenced area, and predator-proof coops and feed storage. Recently, annual permits, costing \$15, were added to the fold. These conditions help ensure that chickens and their neighbors will peacefully live side-by-side, without room for argument against the amendment.

Disease, however, is still bound to come up. The word itself is enough to scare many into avoiding chickens like the plague. Some will even cite the Center for Disease Control to illicit fears of an avian flu outbreak. Interestingly, the CDC’s pro-backyard chicken stance could not be clearer: “In the United States there is no need at present to remove a flock of chickens because of concerns regarding avian influenza.”

Though the issue has drawn a lot of attention and contention, there is an overwhelming majority in favor of passing the chicken amendment. Some 392 Missoulians participated in a City Talk on-line survey. 77.6% supported legalizing chickens, even though 49.1% said they were not interested in keeping chickens themselves. The minority has understandable concerns, but they might find that having a few chickens next door often bolsters community rather than creating chaos.

The Community Food and Agriculture Coalition (CFAC) got involved because we believe that the best food is grown close to home, and that all people need access to fresh, healthy food. Having chickens in our backyards will increase access to fresh protein, fertilize garden beds and lawns, and decrease the food waste that is pouring into our landfills. Our goal is to enhance our own food system and help agriculture fulfill its most

basic objective: to feed people. Allowing small backyard flocks of chickens is one very small step towards that end, and it does not come at the expense of a clean, livable city.

Paul Hubbard represented the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition on Missoula's Urban Fowl Subcommittee.