

Moscow goes after dangerous dogs

City council votes unanimously to enhance penalties

By David Johnson of the Tribune

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MOSCOW - Hoping to curb dog attacks and conform to state law, city councilors voted unanimously here Tuesday night to make violation of the vicious dog ordinance a misdemeanor punishable by up to six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

The council balked, however, at a suggestion to also increase the penalty for violation of the local leash ordinance.

"The state code for vicious dogs is a misdemeanor," said City Attorney Randy Fife. "So the purpose of this is to match up the punishment ... with that of state code."

Prior to the amendment, violation of the city's vicious dog ordinance was considered an infraction and usually resulted in a fine between \$188 and \$388, Fife said.

The call to increase the punishment, Fife said, came after a number of reports of dogs attacking people. One of those attacks, according to police records, happened in November when Erin Casey of Moscow was attacked by a pit bull running at large. Casey suffered bites to her legs requiring 79 stitches and the dog was eventually euthanized, according to reports.

The same dog had attacked pizza delivery man Richard Hart earlier on the same day, according to records. Hart, according to reports, was bitten several times on the ankles.

"Who determines if an animal is vicious?" Councilor Walter Steed asked.

Fife said city code leaves that determination to the chief of police. The decision may also be appealed by the animal's owner, Fife said. Chief Dan Weaver last week told members of the city administrative committee he favors increasing the penalty to a misdemeanor.

Steed also said he'd been asked about increasing the penalty for dogs running at large, which is a violation of the city leash law.

"Right now, if your dog is not on your own property, it has to be on a leash," Fife said. "And somebody has to be on the other end of the leash controlling the leash." The current violation amounts to an infraction, said Fife. He said members of an animal task force several years ago did not recommend increased punishment for dogs at large.

"I certainly don't advocate arresting people who have their dog off a leash," Fife said.

Councilor Tom Lamar said he is often asked about enforcement of the leash law. "What if somebody's dog is tied up to a tree or a bike rack while somebody goes in to get a cup of coffee in a store?"

"That's an infraction," Fife said. Most infractions result in fines of around \$50, according to city records.