

HIS VIEW: Many fowl problems facing Moscow

By Henry D. Johnston

Posted on: Tuesday, October 13, 2009



Johnston

If there is something I've learned in my time observing Moscow city government it's that you never know what to expect. With every new day there seems to be a new problem demanding the time and attention of the city staffers and the City Council.

Take, for example, the shocking news that emerged last week that Moscow could very well be overrun with chickens.

Yes, chickens.

According to an obscure ordinance on Moscow's books, every lot in town is able to have up to 25 chickens per 5,000 square feet. The maximum cap per one city lot is 50 chickens, but even at that rate Moscow has the potential to become overrun with the little buggers.

That is why the city will begin to revise the ordinance in the coming weeks and causes me to hope that I'm not crazy in thinking this is a solution in search of a problem. But oftentimes it seems that demanding solutions to perceived problems is what some Moscow residents love to do.

Don't like the group of college boys bunking in the house next door with their constant malfeasance without a permit? Assemble a city commission to rewrite the boardinghouse ordinance to fit your vision of what you want your neighborhood to look like.

Upset with the way the parks and recreation department handled the installation of new playground equipment? Take up an hour of the City Council's time to demand they breach an installation contract simply to appease you.

Disagree with the location of a coffee stand? Appeal the decision to allow the enterprise simply because it does not fit with your "vision" for Moscow.

Think that sidewalk signs around town look trashy? Why not turn the proprietors into the planning department so that a rewrite of the sign code can take place, only to not be enforced after its passage.

Feel that big-box stores don't fit with the "culture" of Moscow? Why not spend some time and money running the world's largest retailer from our city limits by not allowing a zoning change.

Do your neighbors want to add a second driveway to their property so they can eliminate the excess cars parked on the street? Appeal the decision of the board of adjustment to allow the driveway not once, not twice, but three times.

Finally, are you frustrated that a church was completely within the law in locating their private college downtown? Why not file a series of appeals with the city to get the decision reversed, several years after it was originally allowed.

I've always been amazed by the little things people choose to battle in this town. Yet no one makes any noise about illegally parked cars, overgrown shrubs on sidewalks, blocked vision at intersections and other hazards. Citizen complaints can work if they are used to the benefit the entire town more than the individual.

All of these examples point to a trend wherein Moscow's "citizen activism" sometimes crosses into a type of de facto citizen government. Despite the delusion of many in our town that we are a direct democracy, it is important to point out that we are not.

We elect a mayor and City Council to hire qualified city administrators and to appoint qualified individuals to city commissions. Every so often neighborhood level problems may need to be reviewed by the council but not in the volume or frequency they have been in the past.

So I guess the "fowl" problem we're currently facing is ironically appropriate in a storybook sort of way.

For just as it was in "Chicken Little," the sky is always falling in Moscow.

Henry D. Johnston is general manager of an area retail store.