

Backyard hen program would be boon to residents, says advocate

The 'Shop Local' movement is in full swing as we endure a second lockdown, but there's another movement one resident says we should take to heart as well: grow local – at least when it comes to eggs.

That was the message delivered to Council last week by local resident Darryl Moore. Mr. Moore, a long-time proponent of a being able to keep backyard hens in Aurora, said going down this road and adopting the necessary bylaws to make it happen could pave the way not only for home-raised food in the form of eggs, but also pets, companionship, and even educational opportunities.

'These are small things, but they're important,' said Mr. Moore. 'I know I have autistic children and animals are a very good thing for them, and chickens work very well that way. As well, people are learning where their food comes from.'

This is not the first time Council has considered a backyard hen program, but previous efforts have fallen on the issues of odour, noise, and potentially attracting predators into neighbourhoods.

Mr. Moore tackled these issues point by point, contending that backyard hens have no greater impact than dogs, cats or other conventional pets when it comes to odour and any scents are easily mitigated. As for noise, roosters would be the main culprits and would fall outside of any backyard hen program.

But the issue of predators, however, was less clear cut.

'It depends on where you live,' said Mr. Moore. 'Where I live on Victoria Street, wolves and coyotes are not a big issue. Next to a ravine, they might be. It is easy enough to fortify the coops so it is not a big issue and you fortify them as much as you need depending on the types of predators you can expect. Chickens are on the bottom of the food chain, so animals are going to want to eat them, but it is easy enough to take care of.'

The impact of backyard hens on property values, he admitted, was harder to evaluate but research and conversations with realtors, he contended, indicate it is minimal.

'The main issue is people's perceptions,' he said. 'Property value is a perception. It isn't really there because there isn't an issue – people often don't notice the chickens. Everyone has the right to enjoy their property to the best they can and that is probably the thing that comes up: they don't want the nuisance of a chicken next door. There's a lot of interest in this Town for backyard hens and I am really hoping that given the experience other municipalities have had, including ones right next door, that we can move quickly and implement based on knowledge and come up with some pilot project to get started and then move from there.'

If Aurora adopted a backyard hen program, they wouldn't be reinventing the wheel. Similar programs have been piloted in the City of Toronto while the Town of Newmarket has incorporated provisions into their bylaws whereby all one has to do is apply for a permit with the Town, with some restrictions tied to yard size.

Mr. Moore's pitch received a mixed reception from Council.

One lawmaker to signal their tentative support was Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who questioned the best method of getting a pilot project up and running. While the earliest a motion to do can be brought forward is February, she said there is much to consider.

'It seems there is an appetite and other municipalities have taken that step,' she said. 'Maybe there is some room to foster this idea and something we can implement here.'

Less enthusiastic, however, was Councillor Harold Kim, who said he would not be able to support the idea 'at this time.'

?It is not because I don't necessarily agree with your project, because it is certainly a noteworthy one?but this reminds me of when a couple of members of Council, including the then-mayor introduced the transparent garbage bags [initiative]. It was a very worthy project to move forward with, but do we have acceptance from the general community and the public? They have also inherited an intrinsic right to enjoy their property. Even though everything you say might be scientifically correct, it is about convincing everyone around you and that is a big problem and the challenge for me. I think it is just a matter of time.

?It is about convincing our fellow neighbours and our community members to adopt it. It is not necessarily an overcoming [of] the fears of coyotes or salmonella?even though we have all the facts on the presentation. It is about convincing the general public. For those reasons, it is going to be challenging for me to sponsor it.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter