

ARTICLE 33

In 2010, Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society rescued and found homes for more than 300 domestic rabbits. These rabbits are litterbox trained, play with toys, and live comfortably in homes with individuals or families who treasure their companionship much as many of us do our pet dogs or cats.

Any proposal that would allow rabbits to be raised in backyard hutches in Amherst for the purposes of slaughtering for food and/or fur, sets animal welfare in Amherst back 20 years. While backyard rabbit hutches may have been common in past decades, rabbits have become an increasingly popular companion animal and are viewed by a significant sector of our society as such.

As social animals, rabbits crave interaction. If they are handled frequently and gently when they are little, they will always be happy to interact with people. Older rabbits tend to become even more affectionate and companionable as they age and are often content to spend the evening snuggling beside their human companions.

Rabbits are playful creatures. They hide, run, jump and toss their toys about in apparent joy. They form close bonds with their human companions.

People quickly realize that they can become attached to their rabbit in the same way they do to their dog or cat.

These qualities are not unique to rabbits kept as pets—they are also qualities shared by rabbits condemned to the constant confinement and sensory deprivation typical of animals raised for meat or fur. There is simply no way to excuse our failure to treat rabbits with the humane care we provide other companion animals.

No town bylaw allowing for the raising of cats and dogs for fur or food would be passed in Amherst. We therefore recommend that “Article 33, Petition Zoning By-Law, Accessory Livestock or Poultry,” condemning rabbits to such treatment, be removed from consideration. In fact, we further recommend that “rabbits” be removed from designation as “livestock” under this Article, and re-classified as “pets.”

Respectfully,
Leslie Harris
Executive Director
Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society

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Keeping backyard rabbits, bad idea

To the Bulletin:

I am writing concerning the proposed Amherst bylaw to allow the raising of up to 12 chickens and 12 rabbits in residential neighborhoods. Specifically, I'm addressing the subject of the humane treatment of rabbits, which is a bigger issue than most people are aware of.

The rate of rabbit procreation is not only legendary, but a very real concern that can quickly get out of hand since most people won't pay the cost of spaying and neutering. Animal rescue groups and control officers are often called in to deal with grossly overcrowded, unhealthy rabbit spaces as people become overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. People have "dumped" impulse-buy Easter bunnies in yards where they see rabbit hutches. This often ends up in the destruction of huge numbers of these animals.

Recently a local farmer asked my advice about a pair of rabbits he had purchased in hopes of breeding. They had become seriously ill, but he couldn't afford to take them to the vet. He was so saddened to witness their suffering and demise. It's very common for a whole yard of "hutch bunnies" to become infected with 'pasteurella' — a general term for a mostly fatal group of communicable diseases that sweeps through bunny colonies. Also, in hot humid weather, outdoor rabbits are prone to fly-strike, which can kill them within 24 hours, or they can become hosts to other debilitating larvae.

The task of making outdoor hutches safe from a large range of crafty predators is extremely difficult and often, when sensing mortal danger, rabbits can go into shock or die of heart attacks on the spot. Animal organizations are constantly dealing with traumatized and mistreated rabbits.

Keeping rabbit environments humane, pest free and healthy is a much bigger job than most people even imagine. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Even with the best of intentions, the situation all too often becomes overwhelming. Who will monitor these conditions and the well-being of these animals? Sending an inspector once a year is totally inadequate.

Shelters and rescue organizations are already overstretched trying to deal with abandoned bunnies. There are way too few fosterers or sanctuaries. Please consider rejecting this bylaw in its current form.

**FloraLee Newman
Richard Newman
Amherst**

AMHERST BULLETIN

Friday, April 22, 2011

Backyard rabbits a bad idea

To the Bulletin:

As someone who has worked in rabbit rescue and in the field of animal sheltering, I am concerned about the Amherst Town Meeting proposal that would allow Amherst Center residents to house 12 rabbits in their backyards. I urge all Town Meeting members to vote against it.

Raising backyard chickens has become a new fad and some people are setting their sights on rabbits as well. The problem is, keeping rabbits outside is far different than keeping chickens. Popular belief is that rabbits do well in backyard hutches and we have continued to imprison them this way. This belief is false, based on a lack of understanding about rabbits.

Rabbits love to race around and jump in the air; they need exercise. Life in a hutch makes this impossible. Rabbits can suffer from frostbite or

die from exposure or heat stroke. Wild rabbits live underground where they can escape the summer heat or the cold and winds of winter. Just because rabbits have fur, does not mean they do well outside.

Rabbits kept outside are not under the watchful care of their humans the way house rabbits are and they need to be. Rabbits can suddenly stop eating and a rabbit left untreated for even a day can die. Those who are overweight or have digestive problems can end up with feces on their fur. This attracts flies who lay eggs and the maggots will literally eat the rabbit to death.

Predators are a constant threat for outdoor rabbits as well as domestic dogs who may get loose. An improper-

ly built hutch allows predators or dogs easy access. Rabbits can die from fright or break their necks because they panic and run into the walls of their hutches.

If all these reasons are not enough to vote against this proposal, there is one more. Allowing people to keep 12 rabbits opens the door for backyard breeding. When the MSPCA operated all of its shelters, 1,000 rabbits a year were being killed. Shelters cannot cope with the numbers of rabbits already surrendered by people who realize rabbits are a lot more work than they expected or by people whose children "outgrew" them.

Local rabbit organizations work hard to educate people to adopt and not buy rabbits, especially now as Easter approaches. To add more sources of pet rabbits would undermine all the progress that has been made.

**Maureen Ippolito
Leverett**

Friday, April 29, 2011

Rabbits are pets, not food

To the Bulletin:

It has been brought to my attention that the town of Amherst is considering a zoning change that will include an allowance for rabbits to be raised (along with chickens) in backyards, ostensibly for their meat, in response to the 'locavore' movement that is becoming fashionable now.

I find this disheartening.

Today's rabbits have largely become a companion animal, like a cat or a dog. In the 1980s it was discovered that rabbits make excellent indoor family pets and over the last 20 to 30 years backyard hutches have been replaced by indoor pens and rabbit-proofed homes. Rabbits train easily to a litter box and can be trained to do tricks much like a dog can. They love to explore, socialize, play and seek out interaction with their human caretakers.

Conversely, they do not do well outdoors where they are separated from their family and subject to a host of threats. They are vulnerable to cold, even more so to heat, to predators from above and on the ground, to fleas, ticks, mites and worse, to flies that use them as a hatching ground for maggots. Stress alone promotes disease, and for a prey animal on high alert all the time stress is a constant.

National organizations such as the House Rabbit Society, and rabbit rescues like ours have worked for years to educate the public to the wonderful world of rabbits and we have made great strides. Allowing residents to raise rabbits outdoors and potentially butcher them for meat or fur seeks to undo the message that we have sought to get across. Just as we do not eat or use the fur from dogs, cats, hamsters or guinea pigs in

this country, rabbits should be protected from this as well. We are blessed with abundant food resources in the United States and many choices to satisfy our diet. Rabbits have come a long way from the backyard hutch. Let's not go back there again.

I strongly urge the residents of Amherst to vote against this proposal in its present form. Urge that rabbits be stricken from the article. Please do the right thing.

**Marlene Wilhelm
The House Rabbit
Connection, Inc.
Springfield**