

Urban Chickens – A Tempest in a Stew Pot

With the Iowa City Council elections now safely behind us, it's now hard for me to believe that any of us were willing to cast our votes for any of the candidates without first learning what their positions are on the vital Urban Chicken issue.

I was delighted when the concept of urban chickens was recently proposed, because I rarely resist making fun of issues, I know nothing about. My first thought was that this is an awfully silly thing for anyone to be wasting time on. That was my second thought as well. Unfortunately, after doing intensive research on the topic (defined as 10 minutes of Googling) I discovered that a good a case can be made for it.

Before I became such a chicken expert, I used to feel that if I wanted to live with chickens or live next door to chickens I'd move to some rural state like, well...never mind. It's easy to forget that Iowa City is an urban island in a vast rural ocean.

Until recently, we city folks didn't have to worry about chickens or other farm-like critters because they were way out in the country where there's dirt and crops and other strange and wonderful things that we hardly ever see. This is because under current city code, chickens and other livestock aren't allowed to be kept as pets (or as anything else, except maybe in your freezer).

This whole chicken thing stems from the local foods craze that has been gaining traction recently among eccentric people who (for some reason) like to know where their food is coming from, how it was grown and how far it had to travel to get here. Many cities and towns are now looking at how they can be more sustainable, and allowing urban chickens is one step in that direction. It's also about the eggs - four hens can provide up to two dozen eggs per week.

There are a baker's dozen arguments against allowing chickens in cities, none of them compelling. There have been chickens in cities as long as there have been cities. Properly cared for, they are no more of a nuisance

than whatever pet you currently own that you deem to be appropriate.

My only fear is that allowing chickens in backyards places us firmly on the proverbial slippery slope. What's next, Urban Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches? Wait, those are already allowed, as are birds lucky enough not to be chickens. Is there really that much difference between a chicken and a fat, stupid parrot?

In September 2008, Fort Collins, Colorado (population 137,000 compared to Iowa City's 68,000) enacted an ordinance allowing 6 chickens per household to be kept within city limits. A year later, 36 households had acquired chicken licenses.

During that same time period, six complaints were registered with animal control, four of which had to do with crowing roosters. As with the proposed Iowa City ordinance, roosters aren't allowed here either - the problem tends to occur when people buy chicks whose gender is notoriously hard to determine. The other two complaints were deemed to be unfounded.

Aside from Fort Collins, more than 30 cities passed chicken ordinances in 2008 and 2009. Cities currently allowing *Gallus Domesticus* (as we chicken lovers like to call them) include Des Moines, Los Angeles, San Antonio, St. Louis, Seattle, Baltimore, Honolulu, Vancouver, Madison and San Francisco. Do they all know something we don't?

This issue will eventually be in front of our City Council again, and it's a classic tempest in a teapot (stewpot?). Far more time will be spent arguing about it - or writing about it, although my time is cheap - than it is worth.

It's becoming evident this is a growing movement that's not going to go away. We may as well pass an ordinance expeditiously and move on.

Full disclosure: I have nothing to gain if we pass an ordinance allowing urban chickens, because I'll be the last person to consider applying for a license. Living things tend to wither and die under my care, but it's no skin off my nose if you want to give it a whirl.