

# City targets homeless fowl

Population of chickens running loose needs its wings clipped, officials say

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Key West may soon acquire a new public servant: a designated chicken catcher.

The local chicken problem, it seems, is coming home to roost.

These days, an estimated 1,600 hens, roosters and chicks pluck, scratch and wander through neighborhoods and parks here, and some people find them part of the charm of the island.

Others don't. Assistant City Manager John Jones says he sometimes receives 30 complaints a week from assorted bird lovers and bird haters.

So, according to cleanup plan the city is close to finalizing, residents who are fed up will soon get a 24-hour

hotline to lodge complaints. And said chicken catcher will be dispatched to trap and relocate them.

Wild birds will be housed temporarily at the county animal shelter or children's farm at the Monroe County Sheriff's Office, then get permanent residency at sprawling Suncoast Seabird Sanctuary in St. Petersburg — if the plan works.

#### APPROVAL EXPECTED

Key West officials want to pluck them off city streets before downsizing the rapidly growing chicken population, which they figure city commissioners will approve next month.

"You're not going to see people out there in chicken-catching uniforms shooting chickens and frying 'em up. We don't plan to hurt a single chicken," Jones said. "I think every-

body agrees we've got too many chickens running around the city. . . . The only way to fix that is to control the population."

Once fairly concentrated, Key West's chicken population has spread dramatically in recent years. That's because people dump nuisance birds in neighboring communities, compounding the problem, Jones said.

Mark Whiteside, president of Florida Keys Audubon Society, said someone recently dropped off a flock of hens and roosters in his Little Hamaca Park neighborhood and now they're chasing away native and migrating birds — as well as wreaking havoc in manicured yards.

#### THREATENING PRESENCE

Whiteside, a physician, also contends the filthy chickens pose health and safety risks to humans and domestic animals.

"Twice in the last month, I've seen little boys chasing chickens down the street. It's only a matter of time before someone gets hurt," Whiteside said.



LISA FUSS/HERALD STAFF

**NOT COOPED UP:** City officials estimate there are about 1,600 hens and roosters running wild in Key West.

"There have always been chickens and roosters in Key West, and there always will be, but they don't belong in our parks. I'm 100 percent for having them deported elsewhere."

According to city ordinance, chickens can be humanely destroyed if officially declared destructive and obnoxious. But Key West officials don't want to ruffle any feathers, especially

among chicken proponents who have unsuccessfully campaigned to build a chicken park within the city.

"We looked around for some land, but a chicken farm is just not practical right now," Jones said. "These chickens are going to go to people whose whole purpose in life is to save and help them. They'll be going to a good place, not some dinner table."

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