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Chicken issue heating up in Crystal Lake

By HILARY GOWINS - [hgowins@nwherald.com](mailto:hgowins@nwherald.com)  
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[PHOTO] Charlotte Blome of Crystal Lake holds her giant blue Cochin hen Mei-Mei. The Blome family, which owns four chickens, was told last week by the city of Crystal Lake that it was in violation of city code and had 24 hours to remove the chickens from its home or face a penalty. ( (Lauren M. Anderson))

CRYSTAL LAKE – Local chicken enthusiasts voiced their hope for one small step for Crystal Lake and one giant leap for chickenkind at Tuesday night's City Council meeting. Supporters addressed the gatekeepers of the city, presenting their case for backyard chickens.

Jim Garbe of Crystal Lake told the council that hens were safer pets than 80-pound Rottweilers and that he would have started his own coop already had local ordinances been more fowl-friendly.

"I chickened out because I was afraid of you people," he said.

Enthusiasm for Erik and Charlotte Blome's crusade for change has been growing since the couple received a warning from city officials, who informed them that having their four egg-supplying hens was a violation of city code. Erik Blome said that about 10 people sympathetic to his cause showed up to the meeting for support.

According to city code, residents within city limits may keep only cats, small caged birds, aquatic and amphibian animals, and dogs. Anything deemed a "farm animal" is off limits.

Though the code places a ban on all farm animals, Blome said he wants to make sure his focus is solely on chickens.

"As far as restrictions, you should not allow roosters, because you don't need a rooster," he said. "If you want to breed, you can take your chicken to a place with a rooster for a while. Our issue is that hens lay eggs, and that's what we want."

Erik Blome maintained that his hens are clean, quiet and provide a way for his family to partake in a healthy, sustainable lifestyle.

For now, Crystal Lake Mayor Aaron Shepley said the issue needs to be researched further by council members.

"We've directed staff to provide us with the history of the existing ordinance," he said. "I'm quite certain it's been around for some

time. We want to verify the reasoning behind it before we take any action. We've also asked them to investigate some of the surrounding communities and see what's going on there."

After that information is provided, Shepley said, the City Council will need to evaluate whether they want to pursue an amendment to the ordinance.

"The history of these types of ordinances in communities is a desire to keep farm animals out of communities," Shepley said. "If it's possible to restrict to a certain number or type of animal, .... maybe it's something that can be considered. On the other hand, I think people can say three or five chickens is not a big deal, but what if someone wants to keep 50 chickens? That's something you have to consider."

Fortunately for the Blomes and others in support of the backyard chicken movement, they have a like-minded voice on the inside. Erik Blome said that at the Fourth of July parade last Sunday, the stand he and his family held in front of their home prompted 130 people to sign a petition in favor of allowing chickens. Council member Caryoln Schofield passed by, waving and giving a thumbs-up.

Schofield said she is supportive of reviewing the existing ordinance and "making changes to the ordinance to catch up with modern times and trends occurring these days." She said she hoped that some sort of decision could be made within a month or so.

"I'm very concerned with my family's health and how they eat, and it's something we had considered doing in our own yard," Schofield said. "I understand where [the Blomes] are coming from."

Though Shepley said appeals based on chickens doubling not only as a food source but as family pets have been made, he said also that whatever decision is made will not be made rashly.

"We have to be very circumspect about this, examine all the facts and implications," he said. "At the end of the day maybe it will turn out that this will be acceptable and maybe it won't, but the decision won't be based on emotions."

- Northwest Herald reporter Brett Rowland contributed to this report.

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