

Burlington Food Council Meeting
August 1, 2011
Urban Agriculture Task Force - Special Topic Meeting on Chickens and Bees

Meg Klepack, City Market
Will Robb, Urban Agriculture Task Force
Alison Nihart, Urban Agriculture Task Force
Jimmy DeBiasi, Urban Agriculture Task Force
Bill Ward, Burlington Code Enforcement
David White, Burlington Planning and Zoning
Gene Bergman, Burlington City Attorney's Office
Gregg Meyer, Burlington City Attorney's Office
Ed Antczak, Burlington Community and Economic Development Office
Joan Knight, Burlington Co-Housing
Will Bennington, Tamarack Hollow Farm
Brittany Langdon, Tamarack Hollow Farm
Bill Mares, VT Beekeepers Association
Andrea Todd, Burlington Resident
Sona Desai, Intervale Center
Kate Whitman, Burlington Resident
Dan Cahill, Burlington Land Steward
Eddie DeMott, Vermont Health Department

Meeting Notes

Alison and Will began the meeting by explaining that it was intended to be an open conversation about keeping chickens and bees in the city of Burlington, within the scope of the intersection of practice and governance.

Our main questions for today are:

- What should we think about when focusing on these policies?
- What is the science and how-to's of keeping chickens (or bees?)
- Do practitioners have concerns about regulations?
- What are the trouble areas with developing policies?

CHICKENS

Joan Knight - went to a NOFA conference lecture, will send notes about keeping chickens

Brittany – cleanliness of chicken coops is a big issue, but easy to keep on top of.

- Home experience: rotation of rye field and chicken pen, poop is used as fertilizer for rye.
- Three 10x10 yard sections
- systems like this are fairly easy
- rye is more of a grain and grows in 3 or 4 weeks, and chickens seem to love eating them.

Alison Nihart - property size issue arises from that insight.
-what about setbacks and people with small yards

Size of the run and coop are 2 issues.

David White - there are clearly best practices,
- In policy, the issues come down to: public health, noise (nuisance), containment, and standard of care (humane treatment)
- The question is how do we measure these and how do we enforce these?

Bill Ward: Big concern about cruelty for people that don't understand best practices:. Needs to be quantified numbers to prove who is wrong and who is right (in treatment/keeping of animals).

Nuisance issues- odor and also attracting other animals-

Example:-NNE- pig keepers attracting sea gulls, that were pooping in other people's lawns.

Andrea Todd: from friends that keep chickens: we'd love a resource guide for keeping chickens and bees in Burlington, and what you need to know from a regulation perspective.

-can there be a proactive piece of UATF that educates folks on best practices.

Brittany: Keep in mind- policy that is strictly defines what materials may be used to build a chicken coop are very prohibitive and discriminatory towards low-income residents.

Will Bennington: something we have to get over is that... it's going to smell a little bit. A best practice is composting manure to keep the smell down.

Consensus from group that wet times are the most problematic in terms of odor and stormwater runoff from manure.

- Water going into the gutters becomes part of the MS-4 system
- We're regulated under the Clean Water Act
- Water bills have a new charge in Burlington to fund stormwater projects
- When doing this work, we need to consider the full consequences of the issue; stormwater is bigger than neighborhood issues. That needs to be considered in this.

Joan: what about green-space that filters water?

Alison: Potential for fees to fund city expenses associated with regulating these practices?

Bill Ward: we are more involved in the chickens getting loose after hours. Blurred line between police and code enforcement.

- opinion of fee or no fee: if they're doing it now, on their private property, then continue with status quo

-If exceeding a certain threshold, you now have a home occupation: potential for sales.

Will R.: What's a rational number for providing a family of four? When does it become a business?

David White: The number of chickens is related to rules about home occupations. If you have more than you can eat, once you get into selling or bartering eggs, you have a home occupation. Permits are required for home businesses. However, need to consider how to handle for co-housing or multiple units.

Gene Bergman: once you get into the regulatory process, there is an administrative burden. Someone has new responsibilities associated with the new regulations. City is pretty strapped for cash without a new revenue stream.

Andrea: Detroit seems to be creating its own agriculture department. Detroit also distinguishes between "agricultural industry" vs. "home agriculture".

Will B: Soil testing may be a necessary measure for chickens- chickens eat a lot of things out of the soil. Contaminants could bioaccumulate in eggs.

Joan: Selling eggs- our community is a condo community. We all own it. Only some of us will do work for chickens and bees, and we want to sell within our community (multiple unit housing).

Ed Antczak: Business opportunity for best practices. For example, the fact that manure needs to be composted may be a business opportunity. Could be gathered and brought to central composting facility. Think about turning challenges into opportunities. E.g. Baker Commodities picks up waste, and Allcycle picked up organic waste (precedents).

Will R. Reintegrate the manure back into the system would be most progressive. Include in resource guide!?

A how-to on best practices for dealing with the most potentially controversial issues.

Will B.: Anecdote: 5 foot set-back regulation forced him to put the chickens onto the pavement. Storm-water issue became a problem because chickens were pooping on pavement. We need to consider the possible unintended side-effects of policy.

Bill: a good rule would include that chickens must be kept on pervious surfaces

David: not every case will have everything conducive to good chicken practices.

Fire safety: another issue, we are in a dense urban area, with mostly wooden houses. Fire department wants regulations to minimize potential spreading of fires. There is a minimum 5ft setback from property lines rule for flammable structures.

Slaughtering

Why? Laying hens that don't lay any more or raising chickens for meat.

Meg: chicken attacked by a raccoon would be a different scenario.

State Laws are an issue.

Blood going all over the ground is a health concern.

Will B.: The biggest question is what are people going to do with the innards? Tamarack Hollow composts the organs, but in urban areas, it's hard to keep compost that can handle elements as animal organs.

Joan: At Burlington Cohousing, practice is to dig a hole for compost

Will R.: Chicken guts could be handled at Intervale Compost. Though, compost piles in residential backyards can get hot.

What about the increase in pests/ vermins attracted to such things as animal waste and organs? What do we do? How can an individual handle their own problem?

If they are affecting just one resident, they are not likely to be handled by animal control (though they would handle if perceived as a threat to the neighborhood). Consult with Dept. of Fish and Wildlife.

Cats & dogs getting into chickens would be a separate issue.

Alison: Anything else before we move on to bees?

Sona Desai: My interest is that new policies don't negatively affect any commercial farming practices down at the Intervale.

- At the Intervale: agriculture practices at certain scales are exempt by state statute.
- Intervale is one place in the city where we encourage such practices.
- Location is now a historical zone. Another set of regulations that will contribute to the confusion.

BEES

Bill Mares: Has kept bees for 40 years

- bees are not a pet, nor domestic animal: they are on the cusp between wild and domestic, which complicates the policy process.
- bees can travel up to 3-4 miles for forage of pollen and nectar.
- beyond backyards, CONCERN about where they're going to go.

Number of model ordinances: Bill has the FL model in hand.

FL: they have Africanized bees, so they have regulated

Best practices for being a good neighbor:

- No more than 2 hives
- Orient hive entrances away from neighbors
- Keep water available for your bees so they don't assemble at neighbor pools and such
- Prevent swarms (Swarms are a sign of hive health. Swarms occur when they run out of room, fly 20-50 meters away before taking off to a new location.)
- Don't scrape wax off from hive and leave it there (this encourages "robbing")

Issue with private property and controlling swarms: Can beekeepers chase their swarms down through neighbors' yards swarms trying to control them? Policy might address this.

Public policy- here you have a creature that is somewhat endangered. Pollinate flowers and food. We ought to keep them in urban environments. There are probably 15-20 people in Burlington with private bee hives, each with between 1-5 hives. We need to protect these beekeepers

The Intervale has the only professional beekeeping business in Burlington, with more than 15 hives.

NEED: for public to understand the good reasons for keeping bees.

- Anybody that keeps bees should take a basic beekeeping class.
- People should also consider joining a beekeeping club.
- The first year of beekeeping is a daunting task.

There's even a synergy of chickens and bees: chickens eating mite-infested bee larvae.

500 beekeepers are members of VT Beekeepers Association, of which Bill is president.

David: any issue with predators? Not many bears in Burlington, but do they attract nuisances?

Bill: Skunks sometimes scratch at hive and pick at bees as they come out. Can be prevented with addition of hardware to front of hive.

Prevent "robbing": leaving the wax outside the hive attracts pests and 'heats up' the hive, gets them angry.

Solution: there are best practices to follow.

Bee poop is an issue?

Jimmy: Is there an upper limit for hives in an urban environment?

Bill: The Biggest concern is spread of disease rather than lack of enough food for bees. Diseased bees are threat to other hives, not people (bees are more harmed than poor beekeeping than people). Recommend not buying used equipment due to spread of disease. Solution is to make sure that people aren't half-assed in beekeeping.

Nutritional and education value of bees: Rockpoint school has hives. Many classrooms come to Intervale learn about bees. They are trying to get more honey into the classroom. Some could be sold to the student restaurant. Great way to link school/community to farm.

Any legal concerns?

Bill: I have never heard of a law-suit over stings. It would be impossible to prove whose bee stung you.