

## Group says city ordinance hinders canine rescue efforts

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OWATONNA — Sometimes three isn't enough. That's the stance of Heidi Eckers, current president of Peke N Chin Midwest, or Pekingese and Japanese Chin Rescue and Re-homing — a group that rescues small dogs and puts them into volunteer foster homes.



Peke N Chin Midwest president Heidi Eckers and one of her rescue dogs.

In the past, the city had a kennel license which allowed groups like Ecker's to board a larger number of dogs, but in 2007 the council took that code off the books, said council president Les Abraham. The current ordinance allows a combination of five animals — three dogs and two cats or vice versa — not including puppies under five months. Most of the group's rescues are adult dogs, Eckers said.

"Right now, with the ordinance the way it is, we're having a hard time finding foster homes for all the dogs who need to come in to rescue," Eckers said.

The ordinance is written to prevent animal hoarding, neglect and abuse — ironically, exactly what Peke N Chin rescues dogs from. In general, the group takes animals from three sources: Owners who can no longer care for the dogs, shelters, and puppy mills — large-scale, commercial breeding facilities.

Eckers described deplorable conditions in the puppy mills. "Right now, some of these dogs live in rabbit hutches or they're walking on, sleeping on, eating off of wire," Eckers said. "It's not cleaned. Some of them can barely turn around. It's really sad."

Dogs rescued from such situations need lots of TLC before they can be adopted, which is best found in a home environment. Small dogs don't do well in pounds or shelters, Eckers said, because they are easily frightened by the larger, more boisterous breeds.

"Those dogs are not ready to be a pet the minute they're saved. They need rehabilitation, they need to learn how to be a pet," Eckers said. "The fosters work on house training, on teaching the dogs to drink and eat out of a bowl — which they've never done before. A lot of the commercial breeders use automatic feeders and rabbit drip waterers, so these animals don't even know the basics."

Once in a safe, clean environment, most of the dogs go into hiding for the first few weeks. Penny the Chin is a good example. Penny stood stark still in the middle of the floor at Ecker's home Thursday — quite a feat for the dog.

"They run to the darkest, quietest spot they can possibly find. Believe it or not, even though it doesn't look like she's doing anything, this is huge progress for Penny," Eckers said. "When you think about it, for the first year-and-a-half of her life no one even touched her. If they did, they probably grabbed her by her leg and threw her in another cage. Their opinion of people is not real great — they have zero trust when they get here."

Foster parent Jeff Bruce has another dog that only moves in circles, not straight lines, because he is still not used to living outside a tiny cage.

"That's all he's ever done in his life. He's in the house but he's so used to it he doesn't know how to be normal, he doesn't know there's a whole house to go into," Bruce said. "It helps when you have other dogs in the house, say you have a couple of your own that have been there for years. They learn by watching the other dogs."

For now, Peke N Chin is just looking for a variance to allow them to have more than three dogs in their volunteers' homes. They are not asking the council to change the ordinance.

Otherwise, the council could reinstate the kennel license or raise the maximum number of pets per household — 10 dogs total would be ideal, Eckers said. As it stand the ordinance discourages would-be foster homes, who probably already have two or three dogs of their own.

But the group is willing to compromise. "We're open to inspections and whatever it would take to get this by," Bruce said.

The council was open-minded, but non-committal, when Eckers made her case. "If we do anything it would have to go under a kennel license," Abraham said. "There are none at this time, but if we do look at it, that's what I would be looking for — something that would really re-visit kennel licenses and having some teeth in it so that the places that would be used for that purpose would be checked and inspected. That's the only way I would see any action on that part of it."

Council members John Moen and Nathan Dotson said Thursday that they would consider changing the ordinance, but only after careful consideration. "I would be willing to change it. I'm openhearted on this." Moen said, though he added it was a fine balance. "If it's for rescue and the Humane Society then it's positive. The problem comes when you have an animal hoarder — it could be a public nuisance.

Dotson said he was open to a variance request, though it might be better to expand the current ordinance to include non-profit groups like Peke N Chin.

"We don't offer kennel licenses at all. We should go back and look on the books and, if we don't want to make a change, then give the variance," Dotson said. "We need to look at the policy and have something available to organizations like this — something reasonable for them and the neighbors."

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