

## Local Regulation of Nuisance and Dangerous Dogs – Recent Developments

### *Prepared for the 2013 Massachusetts Municipal Association Annual Meeting*

This is the second in a series of three memoranda exploring the extensive amendments to the Commonwealth's animal control laws. Effective on October 31, 2012, An Act Further Regulating Animal Control" (the "Act") substantially revised the procedures for responding to complaints about nuisance and vicious dogs pursuant to the provisions of G.L. c. 140, §157. To simplify the detailed process, attached is a two-page summary of the new standards and process.

### **The Regulatory Framework**

Pursuant to the prior version of G.L. c.140, §157, municipal officials responded to complaints that dogs were "nuisance[s] by reason of vicious disposition or excessive barking or other disturbance". However, the statute failed to define these terms or otherwise establish appropriate remedial action in the event a dog was found to be a nuisance.

The Act addresses this issue in part. Specifically, the Act deletes the phrase "nuisance by reason of vicious disposition or excessive barking or other disturbance" and replaces it with, and defines, the terms "attack", "nuisance dog" and "dangerous dog". Additionally, the statute explicitly excludes certain factors or circumstances as bases for a finding that a dog is dangerous, including, for example, the fact that a dog is a particular breed, or a situation in which a dog was protecting its offspring or owner. Further, the Act proposes seven specific remedies for ameliorating nuisances caused by dangerous dogs. Importantly, while these amendments provide guidance as to how to resolve dog complaints, the Act continues to provide local officials with sufficient discretion to protect the public safety based upon particular facts.

### **Proceedings at the Local Level**

Under the prior and current versions of G.L. c.140, §157, the process for determining whether a dog is a nuisance begins with a written complaint. The Act now gives municipalities greater flexibility in delegating responsibility for handling dog complaints by expanding the list of officials authorized to address complaints to include: mayors in cities; boards of selectmen in towns; or, in any city or town, the chief or commissioner of the police department, or their designee, or other person charged with the responsibility of handling dog complaints.

### **THE LEADER IN PUBLIC SECTOR LAW**

Upon receipt, the hearing authority is required to investigate or cause the investigation of the complaint. The investigation must include an examination of the complainant under oath. While it was common for municipalities to conduct such examination at a public hearing, the Act now requires the complaint be decided based upon “credible evidence and testimony presented at [a] public hearing in the municipality.” As with other types of adjudicatory hearings, although the formal rules of evidence will not apply, we recommend that all witnesses be sworn and the proceedings be recorded for use in the event of an appeal.

The hearing authority should proceed in two steps. First, there must be a determination of whether the dog is a nuisance or dangerous. In making this determination, the hearing authority will be guided by the new definitions set forth in the Act. If the hearing authority decides the dog is not a nuisance or dangerous, the inquiry ends and the hearing authority must dismiss the complaint.

If the hearing authority deems the dog a nuisance, it may “further order that the owner or keeper of the dog take remedial action to ameliorate the cause of the nuisance behavior.” As with the prior version of the statute, the Act does not establish any parameters for such remedial action, if any, but rather, it leaves the response to the complaint to the discretion of the hearing authority. In contrast, if the hearing authority deems the dog dangerous, it shall order one or more of the seven remedies ranging from restraint to euthanization. The list includes remedies commonly invoked by municipalities, and allows the hearing authority discretion to decide on an appropriate combination most suited to the facts of a particular case. However, the Act strictly prohibits the common practice of “banishment”, i.e. ordering removal of a dog from the municipality in which its owner or keeper resides. Further, the Act codifies the common law rule prohibiting the regulation of dogs in a manner that is specific to breed.

### **Appellate Procedure**

The Act does not alter past practice relative to appeals. The owner or keeper of a dog aggrieved by a hearing authority’s decision may file an appeal in the local district court within ten days after issuance of the order. The initial hearing on the appeal is before a district court clerk magistrate who shall hear the witnesses and affirm the order unless it shall appear that it was made without proper cause or in bad faith, in which case the order shall be reversed. Either party aggrieved by the decision of the clerk magistrate may then request a *de novo* hearing before a justice of the district court, who may, based upon the credible evidence and testimony presented at trial dismiss the complaint, or deem the dog a nuisance or dangerous dog. Although the Act states that the decision of the court after a *de novo* hearing is final and conclusive upon the parties, the Appeals Court found that the same language in the prior version of the statute provides for a further appeal to Superior Court pursuant to the provisions of G.L. c. 249, §4.

The Act does, however, provide municipalities with significantly greater enforcement authority during the pendency of the appeal by authorizing a petition to the district court for an order of impoundment. The district court may issue such an order upon a finding of probable cause

that the dog is dangerous. The Act requires the owner to pay the costs of impoundment if the municipality prevails in the appeal and authorizes the municipality to recover such costs through a lien on the owner's real estate or as an additional surcharge on the owner's motor vehicle excise tax.

### **Enforcement**

The Act provides enhanced penalties for the failure to comply with a municipal or court order. If an owner or keeper of a dog violates an order issued under G.L. c.140, §157, the dog is subject to seizure and impoundment by a law enforcement or animal control officer and the owner or keeper may be subject to criminal penalties or prohibited from licensing a dog within the Commonwealth for up to five years. The Act also authorizes the issuance of fines for failure to comply with such orders – a fine of not more than \$500.00 or imprisonment for not more than 60 days, or both, for a first offense and a fine of not more than \$1,000.00 or imprisonment for not more than 90 days or both for a second or subsequent offense. The Act also prohibits anyone over 17 with “actual knowledge” that a dog has been deemed dangerous from allowing a child under 17 to own, possess or have the care or custody of such dog, and further requires a dog's dangerousness be disclosed prior to transfer of possession or ownership.

In summary, the Act makes substantial revisions to the process for addressing vicious dog complaints. We recommend, therefore, that any municipal hearing authority addressing such complaints carefully review the revised definitions and procedures to ensure any action taken is consistent with the new statutory requirements.

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