

Backyard chicken program placed on back burner

By Brock Weir

A tenant fleeing the coop may have Shelburne Council walking on egg shells when it comes to approving backyard chickens.

Local lawmakers are considering a report from Shelburne CAO John Telfer on whether or not the Town should allow residents to keep chickens in their back yards and, at the moment, it is all about the impact chickens will have on surrounding neighbourhood.

According to the report, however, a recent incident since Council first considered a backyard chicken program this past August seems to have poured cold water on the idea.

“Since [August] the Town of Shelburne bylaw enforcement, along with Shelburne Police, have spent several hours investigating and trying to control an illegal backyard chicken operation that has become an abandonment issue,” said Mr. Telfer. “We have had to be proactive in a landlord tenant situation where chickens were potentially uncared for and the tenant had left the place of residence without notice. This put the landlord in a difficult situation and left the chickens unattended for several days.

“Now that the situation is in a control state, all chickens have been removed and the property needs to be cleaned up by the landlord. The point is simply this: that enforcement has had to address this with many hours of work to get results and, further, that an illegal operation [was] left for others to address. This case does not provide a positive image for having chicken coops in a residential zone.”

Council began looking into the viability of allowing backyard chickens in residential zones near the end of August following a delegation by local resident Sylvia Lesak. This wasn't her first kick at the can, having approached the 2010 Council to change existing bylaws “under which chickens are considered an “exotic pet” and not permitted in Town “when she found out her own chicken was not permitted following neighbour complaints.

“The birds are a natural, low-cost way to have fresh eggs and are teaching children valuable lessons,” she contended at the meeting. “Keeping chickens in urban areas has become a movement of sort over the past several years and they are permitted in many cities from Mississauga to Orillia with some restrictions.

“I think backyard chickens, if done properly with good oversight, can be a good thing for the community. This is a trend that is going on in urban areas all over. They are taking control of their food and what they put in their bodies.”

Indeed, the educational benefits of such a program were touted in Mr. Telfer's report, as well as the potential for fresh eggs as a sustainable source of local food, and the off-shoot benefits of natural fertilizer for vegetables and flowers. But, disadvantages were cited too, including the potential of chickens being dirty and harbouring disease or vermin, the “unpleasant odour” of accumulating manure, the attraction chickens pose for predators and, of course, the bylaw enforcement issue.”

Looking towards what other municipalities are doing, Mr. Telfer said Guelph, for instance, has put in place bylaws to control the number of backyard chickens on each property with further details to be hammered out this fall. Orillia, he added, has not yet decided on any amendments to pave the way for the chicken coops, while others such as Brampton, Waterloo, Woodstock, and Huntsville, have paved the way.

“Size of properties in a residential neighbourhood is important to ensure there are no apparent conflicts with confining chickens within the human enjoyment of their property,” said Mr. Telfer, noting Orillia has proposed a minimum property standard of 4,300 square feet for backyard chickens. “In the Town of Shelburne, most newer properties would not be large enough to meet this standard. Also, for coop runs, the City of Guelph recommends a distance setback of 50 feet from any residential unit and our

properties would not meet the recommended distances.

?In Trent Hills, the setback is three metres from abutting houses. It is important we get feedback on how many complaints are being experienced with the limited setback. Mot municipalities are very clear where backyard chickens are allowed, that is define as a particular area of the Town where the separation and lot size is accommodating. In other words, the Township of Clearview, areas of Quinte West, [and] areas of Guelph can meet the requirements and not cause hardships on the established use being residential living due to larger rural lots with well over one acre parcels.

?It is best to view the request on this basis: ?It is not whether we think backyard chicken operations are acceptable in residential areas, but whether it complicates and creates undue hardship for human enjoyment of their residential backyards.'?

With files from Michelle Janzen