



Department Source: Public Health and Human Services

To: City Council

From: City Manager & Staff

Council Meeting Date: June 20, 2016

Re: Cat Licensing

## Executive Summary

This report is provided in response to the Council's request for information regarding the licensing of cats (Project Tracker #4116).

## Discussion

The City of Columbia has two ordinances which pertain to vaccinating and licensing of cats.

The vaccination ordinance, # 5-61, states:

No person shall own, keep, harbor or permit to be or remain on or about his premises any dog or cat which, if over three (3) months of age, has not been vaccinated by a licensed veterinarian with a vaccine approved and listed in the current rabies compendium which will, in the opinion of the director, be effective during the full term for which such license is issued.

The licensing ordinance, # 5-63, states:

No person shall own, keep, harbor or permit to be or remain on or about his premises any dog or cat over three (3) months of age which has not been licensed.

In 2015, 2,832 animal licenses were issued for dogs and cats in the city limits. More dogs, than cats, are licensed each year: 2,399 and 433, respectively. Using calculations for pet ownership from the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA), Columbia is estimated to have 16,721 dog-owning and 13,926 cat-owning households with an estimated pet population (dogs and cats combined) of 55,980. Assuming AVMA estimates are correct, only 5% of all dogs and cats are appropriately licensed.

In 2014, ETC conducted the annual Direction Finder Survey for Columbia. Included in the survey were questions about pet ownership and licensing. Of the 1,009 respondents, 51% owned a dog or cat. Of the 509 pet owners, 67% said that their pet had a current City license. Of the pet owners with unlicensed animals, 57% did not know a license was required, while 32% didn't think their pets needed a license. The price of the license and inconvenience in obtaining a license were each cited by 4% of respondents.

Within the past two years, an ad hoc committee met over several months to study animal licensing. Committee members included local veterinarians, the Central Missouri Humane



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Society, a representative of a local animal rescue group, Animal Control and other PHHS staff, the Business License Administrator, and a council member.

As part of the ad hoc committee's work, local veterinary practices were surveyed to identify reasons why people do not license their pets and what barriers exist to obtaining licenses. Based on the results, the three top barriers/reasons for not licensing pets were:

- My customers do not think their pets will ever get lost or encounter Animal Control;
- The paperwork for the license is inconvenient;
- My customers are not motivated to be in compliance with a City ordinance.

Enforcement of the license ordinance presents challenges. Animal Control officers do not approach animal owners and request proof of license. Unlicensed animals are typically identified when Animal Control is responding to a complaint, or the animal has been picked up by an officer. In 2015, there were 1,475 complaints. Four hundred thirty-two (432) dogs and 29 cats were impounded in the city. Of the animals impounded, 230 owners claimed their dog and only one owner claimed a cat.

Other municipalities have attempted to increase compliance by charging hefty fines; however, this has had the unintended consequence of more owners choosing not to claim their animal due to the high cost. The City of Calgary, Alberta, Canada is an exception. Calgary has very high rates of licensing compliance, significant fines for failure to license, and sends officers door-to-door and out to dog parks to check licenses. Calgary has raised enough in licensing fees and fines to build, staff, and equip a state of the art shelter and animal welfare program. The committee reviewed the Calgary model and the majority of members noted that while the Calgary program is accepted by their residents, it would be less likely to have such support in Columbia. The model has not shown such great success in United States municipalities who have attempted its implementation.

Having a pet licensed has the potential to confer a benefit on Columbia pet owners. One of the goals of Animal Control is to return animals to owners in the field whenever possible. This allows animals to be reunited with their owners more quickly, saves impoundment costs for the owner, and reduces the need for additional shelter space at the Central Missouri Humane Society facility. The animal license represents a pet's ticket home, assuming it is not exhibiting aggressive behavior. The number of animals returned to owners in the field increased from 2% in 2014 to 19% in the first quarter of 2016. Based on the recommendation of the ad hoc committee, the Business License Administrator modified the animal license tag to include "My Ticket Home. My Owner Cares" on the back of the 2016 animal tags.

Animal Control and the veterinarians have agreed to work on developing a more streamlined approach to licensing moving forward and will work with the Business License Administrator to improve the licensing system. Once the licensing process is improved, staff recommends adopting a strategy successfully used in other communities, which involves offering licenses at no cost during a specified month or period of time combined with a strong marketing campaign to increase awareness of the requirements.



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Consideration should be given to evaluating the current license charges as well. If the real goal of licensing is to assure that an animal is current on its rabies vaccine and to enable officers to return an animal to its owner, then perhaps a no or low fee may increase the number of licensed pets.

There should also be discussion that includes moving any revenue generated from animal licenses from the Business License Division to Animal Control and appropriating the revenue to improve animal welfare services in the community. Most citizens view animal licensing to be a form of a tax. Based on the survey of the local veterinary practices, 36% of respondents believed that their customers would purchase a license if they thought it would benefit animals. Forty-five (45) percent were uncertain as to whether it would or wouldn't influence their customers.

Finally, it should be noted that the majority of local veterinary offices sell animal licenses on behalf of the city. While they are authorized to collect a convenience fee, the majority do not do so. Any changes to the current process should include a discussion about fair compensation to those veterinarians selling licenses.

As the department works to improve the current animal licensing system, staff is prepared to bring forward for Council consideration necessary amendments to city ordinances needed to improve the program.

## Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: \$0

Long-Term Impact: \$0

## Vision & Strategic Plan Impact

### Vision Impacts:

Primary Impact: Health, Social Services & Affordable Housing, Secondary Impact: Not Applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

### Strategic Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Not Applicable, Secondary Impact: Not Applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable

### Comprehensive Plan Impacts:

Primary Impact: Not Applicable, Secondary Impact: Not applicable, Tertiary Impact: Not Applicable



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## Legislative History

Date	Action
N/A	N/A

## Suggested Council Action

This is for informational purposes.