Pit bull sterilization laws revive O.C. debate

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SAN CLEMENTE – Sammy, a blue-nosed pit bull, lies on his back in the sunshine, watching hummingbirds fly from feeders in his spacious Talega backyard.

He vies for pats and kisses from his owners with his canine brother, Bozwell, a fluffy Wheaton terrier. At night, he sprawls across a king-size bed on a special comforter nuzzling between Cindy and Jim Blaylock.

The Blaylocks adopted the 4-year-old dog after he was rescued from a Riverside shelter. His muscular body was covered in bites, his ears torn and his nose broken multiple times by strikes from a blunt object.

The couple first read about Sammy in a Register story, after he gave a lifesaving blood transfusion to another dog. Jim thought of Petey, the friendly pup in “Little Rascals.” Cindy worried about stories of pit bulls, but did research. She called her vet, and he calmed her fears. She exchanged emails with Donna Reynolds, co-founder of Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls, known as Bad Rap, in San Francisco. Bad Rap rescued 10 dogs who had survived NFL player Michael Vick’s dog-fighting operation.

At their first meeting, Sammy convinced them. He plopped into Cindy’s lap. He nestled up against Jim and gave him a kiss. Once at the Blaylocks’ San Clemente home, he immediately deferred to Boz, giving the senior dog first dibs on food, bedding and toys.

Starting Friday, all pit bulls and pit bull mixes 4 months and older living in Riverside County must be sterilized. Owners with licensed, intact dogs will be notified, and violators will face misdemeanor charges, fines and penalties. The law was approved unanimously by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors last month, calling pit bulls a “significant impact to the health and welfare of Riverside County residents and their pets.”

The perception of pit bulls as vicious and unpredictable has prompted debates regarding restrictions and owner freedom.

BREEDING DEBATE

Pit bulls and pit bull mixes make up the largest number of dogs impounded in shelters across the country and are the most euthanized breed. Nationwide, more than a million pit bulls are impounded in U.S. shelters each year – 60 percent of which are killed, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

In their ruling, Riverside County supervisors pointed to recent attacks, including the mauling death of a 2-year-old. They also cite the growing number of pit bulls impounded and euthanized in the county’s four shelters.

The new law applies to Staffordshire bull terriers, American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers and any mixture of those breeds. Riverside County supervisors say reducing fertility is the only effective way to stop the barrage of repeated attacks and the shelter overpopulation of these breeds. The city of Riverside approved the law shortly after the county vote. A handful of other cities in the Inland Empire are looking to enact the law. Though the state prohibits breed-specific legislation, local governments can enact breed-specific ordinances pertaining to sterilization.
Robert Miller, director of Animal Services for Riverside County, said there were 4,059 pit bulls impounded at the four county shelters in 2012. Nearly 80 percent were euthanized. Pit bulls or pit bull mixes represent 20 percent of dogs impounded in Riverside shelters and 30 percent of the dogs euthanized by the department.

San Francisco passed pit bull sterilization in 2006. The results: Pit bull populations are down 30 percent in shelter impounds, and 40 percent fewer of the dogs die in shelters. Rebecca Katz, San Francisco’s animal care director, said the law has eliminated nearly all dog fights. No significant maulings have been reported.

Now, residents in Orange County wonder whether pit bull sterilization is a way to stop savage attacks and high impounds at shelters here.

Almost 1,700 pit bulls and pit bull mixes were impounded at OC Animal Care in 2012. About 30 percent were euthanized. This year, there have been at least eight high-profile pit bull attacks in Orange County. Residents in San Clemente, Laguna Hills and Yorba Linda have asked city councils to restrict pit bulls following attacks.

Last month, the Orange County Board of Supervisors discussed more vigilance on dangerous dogs but the board hasn’t looked at breed-specific legislation. An Orange County grand jury in 2008 recommended mandatory sterilization of all breeds. Exceptions would be made for breeders and therapy dogs.

 Supervisor Todd Spitzer, who spoke out against keeping vicious dogs in the county, said doesn’t support breed-specific legislation.

“I don’t think Riverside will control (pit bull attacks) through sterilization or a reduction in the population,” he added. “If you start singling out specific breeds, there are plenty of dogs that are vicious that aren’t pit bulls. I want to make sure we have control over all dogs.”

Spitzer said he wants to reduce vicious attacks by giving more teeth to the county’s law on dogs declared dangerous and vicious. He wants dogs destroyed that can’t be controlled by their owners and have been proved to be vicious.

County animal control officials are working on new definitions for dangerous dogs. The animal care agency is creating a website to pinpoint where dogs declared as dangerous or vicious live within 18 cities and unincorporated areas.

**DOGGING THE OWNERS**

Judie Mancuso, a Laguna Beach animal activist who sits on the state’s veterinary medical board and is president of the nonprofit group Social Compassion in Legislation, applauds Orange County’s effort to get a handle on vicious dogs, but she said that isn’t enough. Mancuso said Orange County should follow Riverside’s example.

“If you look into the freezers and barrels, they’re all pit bulls,” Mancuso said. adding that 500,000 are killed in the state annually.

“They should look at the high-impound breed instead of looking at dangerous dogs,” she said. “They need to shift their focus to the high-kill impounds. Pit bulls are the most impounded, and the most neglected. To do mandatory spay and neuter is the most compassionate thing you can do. Otherwise you’re just mowing them down and killing them.”

The American Veterinary Medical Association and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention both have come out against breed-specific legislation. Those groups say such laws often rely on a 10-year-old study that does not identify specific breeds likely to bite or kill. Therefore, they say, it’s not appropriate for policymaking decisions.

John Hamil, a longtime Laguna Beach veterinarian, for decades pushed early sterilization. But he opposes breed-specific legislation. He doesn’t think Riverside’s law will work.

Hamil said going after the dogs isn’t right; it’s irresponsible breeders and owners who are the problem. Many pit bulls are bred for fighting, making them bigger, meaner and stronger.
Christine Shultz, a board member of Orange County Pit Bull Rescue, agrees with Hamil. Responsible ownership, not breed-specific legislation, is the way to curb unwanted behaviors and over population, Shultz said. The group rescues pit bulls from Southern California shelters and places them in foster homes, where they’re trained and socialized before being adopted out.

The Blaylocks know that Sammy is powerful and has tools to do damage. Casey Oliver from The Pet Rescue Center who saved Sammy from the shelter, said he likely was used as a bait dog to train fighting dogs.

“It’s almost like I have special needs child,” said Jim Blaylock. “We know what the perception is out there. I don’t ever want to put him in a situation where someone is going to blame him. I’m just very protective. I don’t want him to be euthanized because of someone else’s dog.”

Since adopting him, Sammy has been charged three times by a neighborhood, 100-plus-pound Labrador. The first two times, Sammy stayed calm. The third time, the Labrador attacked him and the two scuffled.

Animal control in San Clemente declared the Labrador as dangerous.

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