Plan would redefine parish animal codes
Proposal goes before Metro Council this week

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The legal definition of an animal and deciding when a dog's barking is legally annoying are among a slew of animal laws in East Baton Rouge Parish that Metro Council members will reconsider this week.

The proposal by Animal Control Director Hilton Cole also would ban cockfighting and dogfighting parishwide.

Cole said his proposal is a wholesale rewrite of the animal control ordinance, making it stricter in places, more lenient in others and easier to enforce.

The intent is "to modernize and basically enhance the protection to the citizens and the animals in East Baton Rouge Parish," Cole said.

He enlisted the help of the Parish Attorney's Office, the Capital Area Animal Welfare Society and others in drawing up the ordinance, which is more than twice the length of the existing parish animal code.

Cockfighting is not against state law, but it has been illegal in the city of Baton Rouge for years because the city is a designated bird sanctuary.

Cole said he doesn't know of any cockfighting in the parish, but the proposal would ban it by extending the boundaries of the bird sanctuary to the parish border.

State law already bans dogfighting, but part of Cole's proposal tracks a bill now before the state Legislature that makes it a crime even to watch a dogfight.

The local proposal also makes it a crime to promote a dogfight, allow one to take place on your land or train dogs to fight.

Other sections of the proposal are aimed at protecting people from pets.

Crosses between domestic cats and members of related wild species, and crosses between domestic dogs and wild dog species or wolves would be considered wild animals and could no longer be kept as pets, he said.

"You have this genetic junk running around that doesn't know if it's wild or domestic" and it can be dangerous to people and other animals, Cole said.

However, existing hybrids would be allowed, he said.

The proposal also borrows from law in Washington and Florida to set standards for potentially dangerous, dangerous and vicious dogs.

It calls for increasing the responsibility of the owners for their dogs' behavior and increasing measures to keep the dogs in check.

If a dog is classified as vicious — generally after an unprovoked attack on a person — it would be impounded and destroyed, unless the decision is overturned on appeal.

"If your dog is vicious, you're not going to own it anymore," Cole said.

And beware of your own pets, too, if they're noisy.

If a pet makes enough noise to wake up neighbors more than once and it stays rowdy long enough to ruin a neighbors' comfort and peace, the owner can be cited for a misdemeanor.

People also would be protected from whole species of animals that don't make good pets.

"No person shall own, possess or sell or keep a wild or exotic animal as a pet in East Baton Rouge Parish," the proposed ordinance says.

That's because it is illegal to vaccinate exotic animals against rabies, the animals are potentially dangerous and they require specific habitats and food.

Lions and tigers — and other obviously wild animals — are out of the question, and the ordinance also would ban poisonous species of snakes, including those that have had their poison glands removed, Cole said.

The ordinance has other sections that specifically protect animals from mistreatment by people.
The new ordinance spells out that animals are required to be given proper food and shelter and adequate water, and enough room to stretch out and roll over when penned. Animals also would be entitled to proper grooming, adequate light and veterinary care. Birds would be included in Baton Rouge's legal definition of animals for the first time and would be afforded the same protections as other animals.

Like all misdemeanors, cruelty to animals could result in a $500 fine or six months in jail, or both. The law on impounding strays also would be changed. If a pet bites someone when provoked and has all of its shots and papers, it could be kept under the 10-day rabies watch at the owner's home instead of at a vet's office or the pound. "What we are doing is giving responsible pet owners a break. We are actually rewarding them for vaccinating their animals," Cole said.

Stray dogs and cats that end up at the pound now must be kept for six days before they are destroyed, to give their owners time to find and collect them. The proposal would cut that to four days for cats. That might be tougher on the owners, but Cole said it is easier on the cats, which get stressed and ill in the tight confines of a cage.