

Backyard Chickens



Bylaw Amendment Application

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Overview

Backyard Chickens

Having backyard chickens is becoming more popular in many regions of the Alberta as people are moving towards more sustainable food sourcing practices. Knowing where our food comes from and lessening the environmental footprint caused by large poultry operations and transportation costs leads to a healthier and more sustainable environment for all. As Parkland County prides its bylaws as a way to ensure the “safety, health, and welfare of people and property,” (Bylaws, Parkland County website, 2016), raising backyard chickens ensures the health and welfare of Parkland County residents long-term.



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Prior Legislation

Parkland County Council rejected an application for backyard chickens in 2013 citing the spread of disease to large chicken operations. This is an outdated bylaw that is tantamount to saying we cannot grow lettuce as it may carry disease that could be spread to larger produce farming operations. As chickens are now being allowed in urban areas, it seems that living out in the country where space is abundant and most people are not in contact with large chicken operations first hand, this decision is no longer supported by fact or reason. Moreover, research has demonstrated that mass chicken farms are a bio-hazard and a significant source of water pollution.



Rationale for Backyard Chickens

Across Alberta, many communities are changing their bylaws to allow backyard chickens. In 2019, decisions were made Edmonton, Leduc and St. Albert, that supported the progressive movement of having small backyard flocks. These councils saw the benefits of people being able to safely produce their own food. Times are changing and more and more families want to feed themselves and do not want to rely on large scale operations that are not within a reasonable distance and could treat their animals inhumanely without the public's knowledge.

Small backyard flocks of 5-10 chickens enable families to teach their children about animal husbandry and sustainable food practices. Coops are usually modest, but humane and well taken care of. Placing coops in areas that are a good distance away from any residential structure is usual practice and most people care for their chickens as they would any other pet ensuring their overall quality of life. Most families that want backyard chickens are very concerned with the health and welfare of their animals and will do anything to protect their flock, which includes keeping them free from disease.

As stated on the previous page, large scale operations can pose greater risks to communities, can spread disease more quickly, are a bio hazard, and can increase water pollution. Residents are wanting to source their food locally and do not want to support the environmental costs of transporting food long distances. In 2016, Strathcona County ruled against backyard chickens just like Parkland County's decision in 2013. Part of the reason for Parkland County's decision was the Lilydale plant. This poultry operation is no longer in existence and should not be a current consideration in council's deliberation.

Similarly, there are many people who want to be able to directly source their own food safely, without ambition of commercial enterprise. Personally, I do not have enough eggs to sell to other people, nor are the chickens for meat purposes. They are considered pets and part of our family. If Parkland County residents were able to apply for permits and were subject to inspections like those residents that have chickens in the City of Edmonton, St. Albert, and Leduc, this would ensure the health and safety of those concerned. These processes would ensure that both people and other animals stay safe. And if an amendment to the current bylaw was implemented, I would want the council to take these aforementioned steps to ensure farmers do not lose their animals to disease, people with backyard flocks are accountable to legislation, and that Parkland County can benefit from licensing fees.

Moreover, education is the best way to ensure that people who want chickens understand the risks and educate themselves on the ways to keep their flocks healthy. There is no lack of resources for people to learn about having backyard chickens. Most areas that allow backyard chickens have courses that residents have to take before they can be licensed to have chickens.

Having any type of animal comes with the risk of disease, however, Parkland County allows small acreages 2 acres plus to have barnyard animals such as goats, donkeys, horses, cows and chickens. How do these backyard operations put large scale operations less at risk than a just-less-than two acre dwelling with a handful of non-commercial chickens? It seems there is a double standard based on lot size. Are these 2 acre plus operations subject to inspection? Do they need to have licenses to have the animals they want to keep? If so, residents on smaller parcels of land can abide by the same rules. It seems illogical to allow 2 acres or more to have 15 chickens, but residents on 2 acres or less can have no chickens, but can have a variety of other pets.

I completed a web search of the local chicken farms and there was only one other large scale farm listed as having their location in Parkland County. On their website, Good Land Farms focuses on producing and selling flowers and beef and even though they have chickens, this was not a significant feature of their farm listed on their website.

I have had my chickens for four years without complaint and with the advent of Covid19 and social distancing rules, the risk of spreading disease amongst backyard farmers to large scale operations has significantly decreased. Our personal economic situation is tenuous due to COVID and having 5-10 chickens means that I can spend more on other products from local farms and goods from other local businesses.

In just over 48 hours I was able to get 150 local people to sign a petition in support of backyard chickens on Facebook. I am sure that this will increase exponentially as time goes on. Most progressive acreage owners are wanting to have a life that includes sustainable food practices such as growing large gardens, having pets, and living off the land even more so than their city counterparts. And if they are allowed to have them in Edmonton, it seems this is a bylaw that is in need of reconsideration. Inhibiting people from exercising their right to access sustainable food seems counterproductive in a time where food shortages and financial considerations are at an all-time high.

Benefits of Raising Backyard Chickens

There are many benefits to backyard chickens such as:

- Chickens are natural fertilizer production leading to better growing gardens and plants due to the high levels of nitrogen in their waste byproducts.
- They are wonderful pets each with their own personality.
- They help control bugs and weeds.
- They bio-cycle organic waste (each chicken can eat up to 100 lbs. per year in organic waste).

- They produce fresh, healthy Omega rich (if fed properly) eggs leading to better health of local people.
- They are educational tools for children so they can learn about sustainable, nurturing practices.
- They are an easy aeration tool for the ground as they scratch through dirt to forage for food.

The reason we moved out to the country is to be able to produce our own food and live in harmony with nature. We wanted to reduce our environmental footprint and to teach our son about where food comes from and to care for animals. Living in Parkland County has many benefits including its proximity to the city for work. It would be a benefit to Parkland County to demonstrate its progressive, sustainable lifestyle to modern families that want to live in an area where they can access the benefits of sustainable living.

Questions for Council

In order to leave the bylaw without amendment, the following questions must be answered:

- Please explain the difference between keeping 15 chickens on 2 acres versus 5-10 chickens on parcels of land between 1 and 2 acres?
- Please explain how disease does not spread to large farming operations when people with 2 acres or more can have chickens, but those of us with just under 2 acres pose a risk?
- The only farm in Parkland County is Good Land Farms and they grow flowers and beef as stated on their website. It would be interesting to find out, with the sustainability practices they ~~to~~ promote, if they would be adverse to backyard chickens.
- What is the difference between having chickens in the city on small lots versus having them on acreages adjacent to farmers fields full of cows and other animals?
- Parkland County is a farming community. Why does council want to stop people from learning about and caring for animals that offer significant benefits to those that keep them?
- Research has demonstrated that there are significant health benefits to owning pets. If the well-being of people can be increased with having backyard chickens,

why would council stand against this health benefit? After all, healthy people work and pay taxes.

- What is the difference between having bird cages inside one's home versus having a small pen with a few birds outside?
- If people can have dogs, cows, horses and other animals that contribute to noise pollution, what is the difference between a chicken adding to that overall noise level? Most birds, geese and other wild animals are even noisier than 5-10 chickens. Plus chickens are silent at night because they roost.
- Please explain how having a handful of chickens is detrimental to the overall well-being and economic success of a community.

Resources

There are so many resources available that speak to keeping backyard chickens safely and can educate the public that the argument that disease will spread is unlikely and a stretch at best. Some of these resources available to the public are:

Carney et al., (2015). Raising Chickens in Alberta. Retrieved from <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/ef3fef3e-69b0-418d-8231-2441320cc045/resource/7e2f3133-a2e6-40e7-94ec-55f2f78a0688/download/2015-raising-chickens-alberta-06-2015.pdf>

Government of Alberta. (2020). Small Flock Poultry. Retrieved from <https://www.alberta.ca/about-small-flock-poultry.aspx#toc-0>

City of Edmonton. (2020). Urban Hens Program. Retrieved from https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/initiatives_innovation/food_and_agriculture/urban-hens-project.aspx

City of St. Albert. (2020). Backyard Hens. <https://stalbert.ca/city/approvals/backyard-hens/>

Parkland County. (2016). Farm Animals. Retrieved from <https://www.parklandcounty.com/en/live-and-play/farm-animals.aspx>

Images of our current discreet coop

