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Boston denies backyard chicken-raising request; councilor to explore issue further

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 12, 2011 01:55 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Roslindale resident Audra Karp and her wife Deb Albenberg (left) lost their appeal before the city's zoning board Tuesday.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

The city's zoning appeal board on Tuesday denied a [Roslindale resident's request](#) to overrule regulations that prevent Bostonians from keeping chickens on their property.

However, the resident said she plans to continue to solicit the help of city councilors and other officials, some of whom said they are open to at least exploring the idea, in order to pursue some way to get permission to raise chickens in Boston.

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(Courtesy: Audra Karp)

Audra Karp's three chickens.

Last spring, Audra Karp began raising three day-old chicks in the backyard of the Firth Road home she moved into three years ago. But, this spring, around the time of the first birthday for feathery sisters Yolanda, Roxy and Carmen, Karp said city animal control officials posted a notice on her door telling her the egg-laying trio must go.

The 40-year-old Holliston native who has lived in Boston for the past seven years lost her case against the poultry prohibition at a City Hall appeal hearing Tuesday. The denial was made "without prejudice," meaning the appeal applicant can re-appeal to the zoning board without having to wait the standard one-year period after a denial.

One appeal board member said a decision on the matter of chicken ownership in Boston "needs to have a comprehensive view," instead of being handled on a case-by-case basis as zoning appeal requests are.

District 5 City Councilor Rob Consalvo spoke out against granting Karp's appeal at Tuesday's hearing. But he said he did so only from "a zoning perspective."

Consalvo, whose representation includes Roslindale, called the appeal applicants, Karp and her wife Deb Albenberg "great people," and noted he's received "hundreds" of letters supporting the idea of urban chicken-raising.

After the hearing he explained, "Bottom line is it's a forbidden use of the zoning code," and he said he's never supported approving an appeal request over a forbidden zoning use. Doing so he said would set a "dangerous precedent," in regards to zoning matters.

But he continued, "the question is: does this kind of issue belong in the zoning code," given that it's not building-related.

"I'm open to sitting down with all appropriate parties," including health and safety officials as well as neighbors, "to work toward a reasonable solution," the councilor said.

Karp made her case before the seven-member board, providing facts meant to alleviate common concerns over potential noise, odor, predators and disease that some associate with chicken-raising.

She submitted written letters of support from 42 abutters who live within 300 feet of her in Roslindale, along with a petition she said includes has over 400 signatures from city residents supporting her request that chickens be considered pets in Boston, instead of their current designation as livestock.

Around 10 residents spoke in support of Karp's appeal. In addition to Consalvo, one Firth Road resident and an official representing the mayor's neighborhood services office spoke against granting the appeal.

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The opposing neighbor cited concerns over predators and disease.

Supporters said allowing chicken-raising would coincide with the city's efforts to become more "green."

One woman who said she's a friend and neighbor of Karp said, "There was absolutely no disturbance," during the one-year period when Karp was raising the chickens in Roslindale backyard, "and you can't live any close than I do."

The abutter noted how fellow neighbors, including numerous young children, miss the exiled birds, which Karp has said her father is tending to in his spacious backyard in Ashland.

"I think it actually brought something to the neighborhood," the abutter said of the chickens' presence.

Karp's campaign to permit chicken-raising in Boston has been waged in-part on a [website](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), has garnered local buzz, including a story last month in the [Boston Bulletin](#).

She recommends two particular educational resources on backyard chickens, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Such research has convinced a growing number of cities and towns to allow, and loosen restrictions on, chicken-raising.

Nearby communities like Brookline, Belmont, Lexington, and Newton permit chickens, but with strict guidelines, the [Globe reported last September](#) in a story about a growing popularity in chicken-raising.

Large urban centers like New York City, Oakland, San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, Seattle and Portland, Ore. were all "chicken-friendly" as of 2007, according to [The New York Times](#).

Karp said she's holding out hope for an eventual solution and "looking forward" to sitting down with city officials to search for a way to make chicken-raising allowed in Boston.

One resident speaking in support of Karp told the appeal board, "There are a lot of chickens in Roslindale and in Boston. We need to find a way to make chickens pets," or otherwise permitted.

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