

Easton hears pros, cons of raising chickens in backyards



Nicole Kilhullen holds "Firecracker" Thursday night at the chicken dialogue hosted by the Nurture Nature Center in Easton. (JD Malone/The Morning Call)

By **JD Malone, Of the Morning Call**

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No one clucked at raising chickens Thursday night at a forum on the topic in Easton — not even the chickens.

A pair of Silkie/Cochin chickens, Firecracker and her mother, an unnamed hen, relaxed in their metal wire boxes. The silent fowl didn't appear impressed with the nearly two hours of dialogue about their species at the Nurture Nature Center. The dialogue is the first large public discussion about allowing residents to raise chickens in Easton since 2006 when chickens were, well, put out to pasture.

Easton followed Bethlehem and Allentown in severely restricting, or outright barring, the raising of chickens.

About 60 people attended the forum, but less than a dozen raised their hands when asked if they would want to raise chickens in their own yards.

Scott Overton, who moved to Easton a month ago from the Philadelphia suburbs, said he had to give up his chickens when he moved and would want to go back to small-time chicken farming. Some in the crowd wondered if chickens and urban areas could coexist.

Brian Moyer of Penn State University's Extension program said chickens can be raised just about anywhere as long as they have some protected, outdoor space to roam, clean bedding, and a sheltered spot to roost. He said an average chicken can provide a family with 260 eggs a year.

He also cautioned people to avoid roosters, the male birds whose job it is to protect the flock — usually by crowing loudly and acting aggressively.

"There is no good reason to keep a rooster," Moyer said, "unless you are going to eat them."

Stacy Yoder, a planning expert for Boucher and Jones, an engineering consulting firm, told the crowd that many municipalities that allow chickens ban roosters.

Yoder outlined several local chicken ordinances that give varying degrees of restriction. In Bethlehem chickens can only be on properties designated as farms, or on rural residential zones if people obtain a special exception.

In Bushkill Township residents need 3 acres and at least a 50-foot setback to house 25 birds per acre. In Barrett Township, Monroe County, the smallest allowable plot is 2 acres, and the maximum number of chickens is 20.

On the other side of the state, Pittsburgh permits bees and chickens by special exception, but limits them to three birds for the first 2,000 square feet of property and one bird for every 1,000 square feet after that.

Easton Councilman **Roger Ruggles** told the crowd that no matter what sort of ordinance the city crafts, many people will be left out of chicken husbandry. Ruggles said the city had to be careful about weighing the cost of adding chickens to the code department's platter of responsibility.

He cited the years-long legal battle with the Hubcap Store as an example of how an allowable use can be abused and run out of control, creating a major headache for residents and city leaders.

Michael Adams of Allentown said the city doesn't need to target the worst case scenario to write a workable ordinance for chickens.

"This can be done with a little intelligence and flexibility," Adams said.

"But I have to consider the lowest common denominator," Ruggles retorted, "because it will affect a whole neighborhood."

Councilman Kenneth Brown wondered if some parts of the city lend themselves better to raising chickens, namely areas of high home ownership rates, where there are fewer landlord-tenant hurdles to get by.

In 2006 neighbors of a College Hill property on East Lafayette Street complained about some backyard chickens. The complaints led to the city striking chickens from its books. Some at the forum Thursday asked aloud if Easton is ready for raising chickens.

Ruggles said the city would host a forum in September and work from there on any possible new ordinance.

Tanya Kihullen of Warren County, N.J. who brought the chickens to the meeting, said education and crafting good regulations for raising chickens is the key to success in urban settings like Easton.

"Educate, educate, educate," Kihullen said. "The challenge is upkeep."

After the meeting, Kihullen's daughter, Nicole, pulled Firecracker from her cage. The tawny bird sat on Nicole's lap, eyeing passers-by.

"Just look at that beautiful face," Tanya Kihullen said, lifting Firecracker's beak with a finger.

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