

Falls recasts language on pets

PETS, From 1A

limiting or even outlawing pet ownership.

"This is a pretty untested, new idea," said Stephanie Ortel, lobbyist for the American Kennel Club, a New York-based association of dog owners.

The Kennel Club opposes the pet guardianship concept, as does the American Dog Owners Association of Castleton, N.Y., and the National Animal Interest Alliance of Portland, Ore.

"You can't just take a cute and fluffy term and think that that's going to change people's attitudes," Ortel said.

Menomonee Falls is one of a handful of cities across the country that have adopted the philosophy of a group called In Defense of Animals, a California animal-rights organization that is pushing guardianship as the next evolutionary stage of pet ownership.

Other communities that have rewritten their ordinances include Boulder, Colo., Berkeley, Calif., and Sherwood, Ark.

In Menomonee Falls, ordinances now state that any domestic animal's "guardian" or "keeper" must ensure that the animal is cared for and is not a nuisance to others. The ordinances — which formerly referred to the pet's "owner" — do not change state laws already making it illegal to abuse or neglect animals.

Village Trustee Chris Slinker, who introduced the measure, realizes that the ordinance does little to establish new areas of responsibility for pet owners. But he hopes the change in terminology will heighten awareness of animal rights.

A better awareness is needed, he said, pointing to a recent case in which a dog stolen in Waukesha County was later sold for \$100 and left to die tied to a pole in the summer sun in Racine County. The thief was later sent to prison, and the 14-year-old boy who left the dog to die was ordered to perform community service and repay the dog's owner.

Animals more than pets

Slinker, owner of a Chihuahua named Peanut, said he cannot accept that pets are only property.

"A lot of people have a close relationship with their animal," he said. "And I don't mean to sound funny here. I mean — I love my little dog."

In Defense of Animals also wants people to stop referring to a house pet as "it" and instead use the more personal human "he" or "she," and to speak in terms of "rescuing" or "adopting" pets rather than "buying" or "selling."

It all makes perfect sense to Menomonee Falls animal-lover Lynn Wilde, who owns two golden retrievers. As the proprietor of Friends of Nature pet food store on Main St., Wilde has seen irresponsible pet owners who appear to regard their furry friends as little more than furniture.

"There's some people out there who view them as animals, not pets," she said. "It's a possession, and if they can't take care of it, 'Oh, well.'"

Mary Kenney of Menomonee



GARY PORTER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mary Kenney of Menomonee Falls has three vizslas — Hungarian hunting dogs — including this three-legged one she found at a shelter. She and her husband treat the dogs like family, she says. In Menomonee Falls, they're now not pet owners, but pet "guardians" or "keepers."

Falls, who has three Hungarian hunting dogs known as vizslas, said she and her husband, Rock, sometimes are ridiculed for the way they dote on their pets.

"Some of my friends don't understand that these guys — they're our kids," she said.

More than 1,200 dogs are licensed in Menomonee Falls.

Concerns raised

But not everyone agrees with bestowing on dogs and cats a status generally reserved for boys and girls.

Trustee Donald Broesch voted for the "guardian" terminology not realizing how it would be interpreted. Broesch said he thought it only meant that someone caring for an animal — not only the owner — must ensure the animal does not become vicious toward others.

Although he is quite fond of his own Labrador retriever, Dayne, Broesch called it silly to think an animal could have human rights.

"Pets are pets," he said.

The first city to embrace the "guardianship movement," as it is called, was Boulder, which revamped its laws in 2000.

Jan McHugh-Smith, executive director of the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, said pet owners and others there have widely accepted the change in terminology — and the change in attitude. Even the local newspaper in Boulder has begun describing pet owners as guardians.

"You have to start somewhere," she said.

Opponents of the ordinances

believe that animal rights activists want to restrict the rights of pet owners to care for their animals as they see fit, and that backing away from recognizing pets as property is the first step toward making pet ownership illegal.

Proponents deny their ultimate goal is anything so radical.

Alan Eisenberg, a Milwaukee attorney and supporter of In Defense of Animals, said the main goal is that people realize they share the world with other creatures and that those animals have rights, too.

Last year, Eisenberg argued unsuccessfully before the Wisconsin Supreme Court that pet owners should be allowed to collect damages for lost companionship when their pets die through the negligence of others. He later formed the advocacy group Share the Earth and lobbied for changes in state law.

"All I want people to do is be more responsible for their pets and be more accountable for their pets — as they would a kid," he said.

Eisenberg assisted Slinker in developing the Menomonee Falls ordinances, and he has approached Rep. Sheldon Wasserman (D-Milwaukee) about trying to change state law.

Wasserman said he has prepared a draft of a bill, but he is still studying the matter and has not determined whether existing state laws need to be updated.

"If there are areas where we can improve the law, why not?" he added. "I think there is something more than just pet ownership. ... It needs to be recognized."