

This is the second in a series of columns tracking the progress of a proposed ordinance that would limit dog tethering in Beaufort County.



From the previous episode: Some people think of dogs as personal property. Some people think of dogs as pets. Some people think of dogs as kids. And finally, some people think dogs make a nice meal. It just depends on what culture you come from. Why does this matter? When it comes to dogs, the Lowcountry is in the midst of a culture war that is creating weirdness for local governments.

In January 2008, the City of Beaufort passed a law that says that you can't leave your dog tied up all the time. It's supposed to be enforced by the animal control officers who work for Beaufort County (the city contracts with the county for this service.)

But the new law is not being enforced -- Beaufort County doesn't have a dog tethering law, so its staff can't enforce a law it doesn't have. Beaufort County Council had an opportunity to pass a dog tethering law at the same time the city did, but it didn't.

Here's how it went down.

In the autumn of 2007, Beaufort County Council's Community Services Committee took up a discussion on dog tethering. This came about because some Beaufort County residents were concerned about the number of dogs that were being kept chained up.

Two of these residents were Kim Bonturi and Paula Loftis. They lead a petition drive and collected over 4,000 signatures requesting that the county put an end to chronic dog-chaining. They also formed a new not-for-profit, Chain Free Beaufort. This group wanted to get laws against dog chaining, and they also wanted to create a network of people who could help others choose more humane ways to contain their dogs.

Chain Free Beaufort lobbied hard for a chance to present their concerns to the Community Services Committee. On October 10, 2007, they got their opportunity to make their presentation -- "for informational purposes only." That last phrase is politician-speak that, in plain English, means "we have no intention of taking any action."

This is some of what they presented, according to the minutes of that meeting:

- Chaining causes boredom and loneliness for dogs. The boredom can lead to frustration, then to territorial and aggressive behavior. This can become a danger to the community. When confronted with a perceived threat, animals have a "fight or flight" response. When chained dogs cannot flee from a perceived threat, whether it is a neighbor's child or a well-meaning adult, they are left with one option, to fight.

- Multiple studies have shown that chained dogs are more likely to bite. These studies complement positions of a number of groups, including The Humane Society of the United States and The American Veterinary Medical Association.

- In the book "Fatal Dog Attacks, the Stories Behind the Statistics," author, researcher and veterinary technician Karen Delise notes, "Chaining a dog is arguably the most dangerous condition in which to maintain a dog. Statistically, chained dogs are more dangerous than free-running packs of dogs."

- People chain their dogs for a variety of reasons. Some believe that dogs belong outside and are happier there; others say it is what has always been done, and some think that a chained dog in the yard will deter intruders. As we understand more about canine behavior, fewer people are chaining their dogs, and more communities are passing legislation to address this issue. Our neighbor, Chatham County, already has one in place.

- There is also strong evidence linking chaining and crime. People who engage in dog fighting activities chain their dogs to make them more aggressive.

- * Animal cruelty laws have been in place for a long time, but it is essential that these laws keep pace with the latest scientific information about what is appropriate care for dogs. Chaining goes against all we have learned about them and their needs.

All those bullet points took on greater meaning when Bonturi and Loftis showed some of the most horrendous photos I've ever seen. All of these photos were taken in Beaufort County. All were dogs on chains. Some were alive, some dead. It made me want to throw up.

It's one thing to read about a dog being chained up for all its life. It's another thing entirely to see a photo of a dog whose collar has been on for so many years it that has become embedded in the dog's neck. Or a dog that has choked to death after getting tangled or hung up on its chain.

Some county council members thought this was pure sensationalism. They didn't believe the photos were taken in Beaufort County. What's more, some council members didn't even believe the photos were real. They claimed that their constituents might have staged the photos to get ghastly visual results that would prompt council into action.

And it quickly became apparent that the Community Services Committee had no intention of presenting this before full council.

NEXT: The other side of the story. Council members who represent rural districts want to limit excessive governmental control and uphold the property rights of animal owners – and they have safety concerns of their own. In the meantime, Chairman Weston Newton's request that the Community Services Committee reconsider the issue has not been honored.