



WHAT TO DO WHEN A BAD BILL IS INTRODUCED

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A neighboring community has just established a law limiting dogs to three per household. Now your community is threatening to do the same. And to make it worse, the state legislature is considering a mandatory spay/neuter bill.

Unfortunately, news like this is more and more common every day, and the prospect of all these threats can seem overwhelming. The good news is that *there is something you can do*.

Although the policy-making process may seem intimidating, ordinary citizens truly can impact it. Remember, policymakers are called “public servants” for a reason – their job is to listen to constituents and make reasonable policies that benefit the entire community. However, for elected officials to know what’s best for their community, they must first hear from their constituents.

Put yourself in a policymaker’s shoes. Few have any experience with dogs other than a family pet. They hear plenty of negatives about dogs – from news stories, from politically active animal lobbyists and so on, but not a lot from responsible breeders. Many breeders are so busy with their dogs, clubs, work and other activities; it’s hard to get involved in politics, too. But if we don’t get involved, policymakers won’t hear us and we concede the debate. Following are ways you can be an effective advocate for your dogs and your rights:

Be a Constituent.

Elected officials listen to constituents; therefore it’s vital that you be an active, registered voter. Did you know that how frequently you vote is a matter of public record? *Your vote is even more important in local elections that are held in nonpresidential years. Fewer people vote then, so fewer people pick the winners.*

Meet Your Local Representatives.

Local legislators are constantly looking for ways to maximize their name recognition. Inviting a legislator to present an award at your dog show, participate in a Responsible Dog Ownership Day event or speak at a club meeting are great ways to introduce them to the sport and educate them about responsible dog owners and breeders. Attending their local fundraisers, coffees, or luncheons are also great opportunities to introduce yourself.

Look for Notices of Proposed Laws.

The AKC Government Relations Department (GR) tracks and monitors legislation that may impact dog owners right at the state and federal levels, and invites you to keep up to date on these issues by using our online legislative tracking service (www.akc.org/canine_legislation). Local ordinances are more difficult because there is no single location where all newly proposed ordinances can be found, and communities approach new laws in different ways. Without someone committed to following local events, it’s common for local ordinances to be passed quickly, without affected citizens even knowing about them.

One of the best ways to stay on top of local ordinances is to *read the legal notices in your local newspaper or your community’s website*. Contact your local municipality/county offices and find out how and when they publish legal notices. Be sure you check these notices for references to “canine,” “animal control,” or “animal” ordinances. If these are mentioned, investigate the proposal further—notice don’t generally provide specifics.

The Proposal

Once you become aware of pending changes to the animal codes, there are several steps to take to ensure that you have all the necessary information.

Find out the status – Call the city or county clerk’s office.

- Is there a formal draft? Obtain a copy of the changes and the existing law.
- Ask AKC GR staff or a local expert to review the measure. Interpreting the “legalese” of many ordinances is challenging and experience may be needed to correctly read and evaluate the impact of various phrases.
- When will the vote occur?
- When is public testimony allowed?

Determine why changes are being proposed.

- Was there a specific incident? Could it be handled using the current code or state law?
- What is the problem they are looking to solve?

Build Your Coalition

- Alert your club members and AKC Government Relations. GR can help you reach out to other clubs, judges and breeders in your community.

- Contact your state federation of dog clubs. Federations have experience in state politics, know the state laws, and may be able to assist you in addressing the problem most effectively.
- Contact local animal-oriented businesses. In some cases changes will dramatically impact groomers, veterinarians, boarding kennels, and pet stores. Locally-owned stores are more likely to get involved than national chains.

Organize For the Fight

- Write down specific concerns with the proposal.
- Develop talking points.
 - AKC GR has talking points available on many issues such as mandatory spay/neuter, breeding restrictions, breed-specific legislation and limit laws.
 - Be specific and clear about what is problematic in the legislation.
- Suggest alternatives if appropriate. For example, limit laws are often proposed due to noise complaints. However, a well-written noise ordinance addresses the problem without negatively impacting responsible owners.

Communicate Effectively

Meet with legislators and/or staff to express your concerns.

- View these meetings as an opportunity to educate. Most legislators do not have concrete ideas about animal control issues, are anxious to hear from constituents, and will be responsive to reasonable recommendations and alternative ways to solve a problem.
- Meeting with staff rather than the elected official is often beneficial.
 - Staff often have more time to devote to the meeting.
 - Legislators often base their decisions solely on staff recommendations.
- Expect to have 10-15 minutes so be succinct and specific.
- Take a small group, no more than 4-5 people and make sure at least one is a constituent. It isn't necessary for the constituent to do the talking, anyone can be the spokesperson.
- Decide before the meeting who the spokesperson will be, or if several people speak, who will cover which topics. Time is limited, so do not repeat topics, but assign a specific topic(s) to individual speakers.

Start a letter/email campaign.

- Contact legislators to find out whether they prefer letters or emails. If time is of the essence, emails or faxes may be preferred. However,

some legislators only respond to hard copy letters.

- All communications should be professional and polite.
 - *Never use foul language.*
 - *Never call a legislator names or personally attack a legislator.*
 - Always use proper grammar, correct punctuation, and complete sentences and paragraphs.
 - Use the proper form of address: Councilman Smith, Mayor Jones, etc.
 - Emails should be in exactly the same format as letters.
 - List your full name and address at which you are registered to vote – legislators need to be able to identify you as a constituent or local resident.

Prepare speakers for public meetings.

- How much time are speakers allowed?
- If one or several people are speaking on behalf of a group, the final speaker should ask all in attendance who agree with your group to stand.
 - Your group may want to be identifiable by wearing buttons or a specific-colored shirt.
 - Audience members should remain quiet during the process. Booing, rude comments, or outbursts will reflect poorly on the group.
- Dress neatly, in at least business casual attire, to demonstrate respect for the process and to showcase your group as responsible, professional members of the community.

AKC Government Relations Can Help.

For more information or assistance, call the AKC GR Department at 919-816-3720, email doglaw@akc.org, or visit www.akc.org/canine_legislation.

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