

ON A WING AND A PRAYER

THE URBAN CHICKEN-KEEPING MOVEMENT TAKES FLIGHT

By Ron Berezan

Henriette (not her real name) greets me enthusiastically at the door of her large home in an affluent southwest Edmonton neighbourhood. “Come on in, the ‘girls’ are in the garage,” she explains.

It is mid-winter and Henriette has decided to offer her two Plymouth Rock hens refuge from the cold in the attached double garage. “My husband built the coop for me this past spring. As soon as the weather warms again, we’ll return it to the backyard.”

Although Henriette grew up on a farm, keeping chickens is a new venture for her and her family. “This is just the next step for us. I have been buying organic eggs from the farmers’ market for years, and, after researching on the internet, I decided, why not?” So her family, including her husband, two sons (8 and 10 years old) and three dogs, soon expanded to include three hens. “In addition to Belle and Check (so named by the boys), we also had Brownie.” Unfortunately, Brownie came out on the losing side of a tangle with a neighbourhood dog a couple months after her arrival.

Henriette had a vague awareness that keeping chickens in her backyard was not “exactly legal” in Edmonton. “I figured we should all have the right to grow our own food if we are not harming anyone in the process. There is no good reason why we should not be able to do this.” Fortunately for Henriette, her four immediate neighbours agree. So far, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. “Of course,

the beautiful, fresh eggs delivered to neighbours from time to time helps,” she laughs.

Henriette and her family are part of chicken keepers in cities across the country. The past couple of years have seen urban chickens (and their owners) crack the mainstream media headlines in stories ranging from the unanimous decision of Vancouver City Council to rescind their anti-chicken bylaws, to the much publicized struggle of Halifax resident Louise Hanavan to retain the right to keep a small flock of hens in her backyard. Although Ms. Hanavan is thus far unsuccessful in her battle with Halifax City Council, her story has generated surprising interest and debate across the country and has put the discussion of poultry in the city back on the table. The “chicken underground” is now thriving in cities such as Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto and beyond (see box on page 13).

Indeed, it has only been in the last fifty years or so that most municipalities in Canada have legislated chickens and other small livestock out of the urban environment. The vacant, but still standing, coop in the backyard of my grandparents’ north Edmonton home is testimony to a time when having a few laying hens in your yard was no more exotic than grow-



‘Henriette’ holding Check.

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ing some of your own vegetables. For most city dwellers around the world, this is indeed still the case. Even North American cities, such as Victoria, Brampton, Seattle, Miami, Los Angeles, Denver, New York and countless others, have welcomed chickens as part of the urban landscape for decades. While occasional complaints or conflicts between chicken owners and their neighbours do occur in these cities, these incidents are reportedly far fewer than those generated by dogs and cats.

As the 100-mile diet and other expressions of the local food movement weave their way into the households of more and more Canadians, it is no surprise that fresh urban eggs are increasingly on the menu. This has left municipal governments scrambling to respond by either enforcing outdated post-war land use policies that attempted to create a firm division between the city and the farm, or by revising these ordinances to reflect the growing appetite for urban agriculture. Many chicken keepers, like Henriette, choose not to brood over the question of legality and quietly maintain their small urban flocks beneath the municipal radar. Others, like Calgary’s CLUCK (Calgary Liberated Urban Chicken Klub) and Edmonton’s River City Chickens are organizing more publicly for bylaw changes, hoping to open the coop door to many more would-be chicken keepers.

For their part, urban chicken

advocates argue that not only does keeping chickens in the city allow people (especially children) to learn more about where their food comes from, it reduces carbon emissions by producing food on site. Keeping chickens is a great waste reduction strategy as they can consume significant amounts of household and yard wastes, di-

verting them from the landfill and potentially cycling that organic matter back into the soil through composting. Similarly, chickens can be part of an integrated pest management strategy, helping to control populations of slugs and other garden pests. Urban hens typically enjoy far more space and a much healthier living environment than their poorer cousins in intensive poultry operations. And, as Henriette gleefully claims, “Chickens are fun! They all have personalities and they take way less work than the average cat or dog.”

The urban chicken revolution: five key steps for bringing chickens to the city

- 1. Research** – Go on-line to find the bylaw that would potentially prohibit chickens from your municipality. You may be surprised to discover that one does not exist or that certain geographical areas are exempt from the bylaw. Get help from a lawyer or an urban planner to understand your bylaws if you need it.
- 2. Organize** – Find other would-be chicken lovers in your community and get together. You will be far more effective as a group than as an individual. Connect through social media, food security groups, Slow Food organizations, or other local food initiatives. Include some people with first-hand chicken experience in your group.
- 3. Build your case** – Find out if others have tried to change the bylaw before and what the barriers have been. Anticipate what objections city administration or council may have and be prepared to address them. Gather case studies and bylaws from other cities that allow chickens. Come up with a proposal that you think would work well for your particular municipality.
- 4. Find allies** – Rather than assuming an adversarial position, seek out potential allies on council and administration and ask for their support. Invite them to be seen as innovative, forward-thinking and progressive. Ask for their advice in how you should steer your request through city channels.
- 5. Be tenacious** – Be prepared for the fact that you are going to meet active resistance and inertia. Make it clear that you are in this for the long haul and that your group will continue to work through whatever channels are available. Most changes of this nature happen over a period of a couple of years, not days or weeks. Remember you have history and the future on your side!



Backyard chickens in the Village Homes community of Davis, California.

So why all the flap over a few city chickens? The usual justification for prohibitive urban chicken bylaws can be grouped into three categories:

- 1) public health concerns;
- 2) conflicts between neighbours;
- 3) concern for the humane treatment of the birds.

Leaders of the chicken revolution and solitary keepers alike would be wise to consider carefully these concerns and address them in their own practices and proposals to city administrations.

The primary public health concern raised around keeping poultry in the city is the potential for contraction of avian influenza. While contraction of bird flu by small urban flocks is an extremely rare occurrence, the Government of Alberta advises backyard bird owners to take the following three simple steps to minimize risk.

1. Keep domestic fowl penned to avoid contact with wild waterfowl (the source of avian flu);

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Urban chicken activists on-line

Groups

- CLUCK (Calgary): www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=68948494632
- River City Chickens (Edmonton): <http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/rivercitychickens>
- Chickens in Vancouver: www.chickensinvancouver.com
- SBCS (Saskatoon): <http://ko-kr.facebook.com/group.php?v=wall&viewas=0&gid=74697580927>
- Backyard Chickens in Toronto: <http://torontochickens.com>
- Waterloo Hen Association: <http://sites.google.com/site/waterloohenassociation>
- Halifax Chickens: www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7740422940

Information

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| • www.backyardchickenscanada.com | • www.chickenkeeping.com |
| • www.madcitychickens.com | • www.backyardpoultrymag.com |
| • www.mypetchicken.com | • poultryone.com/raisingchickens.php |
| • www.urbanchickens.net | • www.henspa.com |
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| • urbanchickens.org | |

2. Protect the hens' water and food from contact by wild bird populations;

3. Sterilize equipment and clothing before having contact with other poultry.

Henriette, herself a practicing veterinarian in Edmonton, points out that even if a backyard hen were to contract bird flu, the vector of disease would essentially stop there as the absence of a large population of other fowl nearby would give the virus nowhere else to live.

As with all other domestic animals, care must be taken to maintain a clean and sanitary living space for hens. Regular cleaning of coops and proper disposal or composting of waste will reduce the possibility of transmission of any pathogenic organisms. There are many excellent coop designs for small urban flocks that make cleaning as easy as removing a sliding tray beneath the roost. Unfortunately, a few irresponsible chicken owners can sour the air for the majority by not properly cleaning their coops and alienating unhappy neighbours.

In addition to smells, neighbours frequently have concerns

about noise, either assuming that all chickens crow or that roosters will be part of backyard flocks. However, very few North American municipalities allow roosters and only the bravest (or most foolish) among us would be tempted



Check and Belle consider each other.

to ruffle those feathers. Nevertheless, it is important to educate both the public and policy makers as to the fact that the average hen will be far quieter than the average dog. Furthermore, some city ordinances call for coops to be located a minimum distance from

the property line. This can help buffer any smells or noise that do occur.

Humane societies across the country express concern that well-meaning urbanites may embrace a new pet trend without understanding what they are getting themselves into (remember the Vietnamese pot-bellied pig fad?). Indeed, the SPCA in Vancouver opposed the change to the bylaws in that city, fearing that they would be ill equipped to deal with an onslaught of abandoned hens at their doorstep.

Would-be chicken owners need to educate themselves before erecting the backyard henhouse; chicken advocacy groups can play a major role in facilitating this. Some groups in American cities offer backyard poultry workshops, chicken networking groups, volunteer mentors and coop tours. Those just getting started would be advised to follow Henriette's lead and begin with a small flock of a hardy, dual-purpose (for meat and eggs) breed. While dual-purpose birds may lay fewer eggs (about two every three days per bird) than White Leghorn hens, they generally live longer,

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are easier to handle and are more resistant to disease. Proper feed, including calcium supplements, protein and grit, needs to be secured before bringing home that irresistible little hen. Most cities still have farm supply stores which will stock these items, although organic feed can be harder to find and may need to be ordered from farther afield.

As plots to liberate chicken keeping in urban areas continue to hatch across the country, there is a new ray of hope on the horizon. In April of this year, a Calgary woman will go to court to fight a ticket for illegally keeping hens in her yard. She will base her argument on Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which protects the right to adequate food for all people. Commenting on a similar case in Manitoba, the Winnipeg Free

Press has suggested that "... when up against a 'right to grow food' challenge, it is doubtful jurisdictions would be able to defend their bylaws on the basis of nuisance or noise." Should this argument prove to be successful, there may be no stopping chickens from coming home to roost in urban neighbourhoods from coast to coast.

Check suddenly begins to cluck and flap her wings. "Oh!", Henriette exclaims, "We're getting ready to lay." This is an exciting event after a period of relative winter dormancy. Henriette beams about the closer connection she and her family have made with the source of their food. "This is important for everybody, but especially for those of us who live in the city," she reflects. "Just like growing our own vegetables, having this connection to animals is equally valuable."

While Hummers still outnumber hens in her Edmonton neighbourhood, pioneers like Henriette and hundreds of other urban chicken keepers across the country are making a strong statement about food security and a sustainable future, with or without local authorities on board. Henriette scoops the fresh egg out of the coop and proudly presents it to me. "Here," she says, "take it home and see for yourself how great they taste." And I do.

Ron Berezan is the co-founder of Edmonton's River City Chickens group. He operates The Urban Farmer, an organic gardening, edible landscaping and permaculture design business in Edmonton. www.theurbanfarmer.ca

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