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Bill package opposed by Macomb board called 'Trojan Horse'

Bills would set statewide regulations but cede local control

By Jameson Cook, The Macomb Daily

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A growing army of animal rights activists are attempting to stop a pair of state laws that would cede local control of pet shops that the activists claim would increase the use of unhealthy “puppy mills.”

The Macomb County Board of Commissioners weighed in on the dispute last week by joining more than two-dozen organizations in opposing HB 5916 and 5917, which would set regulations for pet shops but, according to foes, actually would take away local control and potentially give pet shops free reign to sell pets culled from the despised “puppy mills.”

Pam Sordyl of Puppy Mill Awareness of Southeast Michigan in Northville called the bill package a “Trojan Horse,” and animal-rights advocate Joe Sowerby of Clinton Township called it “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

Sordyl said the bills “would allow pet stores in Michigan to continue sourcing from large-scale, inhumane commercial breeding facilities and to continue to sell sick puppies to the public, while at the time stripping cities, towns, and counties in the state of the authority to address this issue.”

“They (the bills’ proponents) are trying to shove them through in cleverly designed bills that do nothing to help anyone except pet stores,” Sowerby said.

The county board passed a measure by a 10-2 vote a resolution to oppose the bills on request of county chief animal control officer Jeff Randazzo, who lamented proposal’s prohibition of the county, city, township or village to enact any ordinances or rules to regulate pet shops.

Randazzo told the board the regulations would “regurgitate” what is already in place locally. Local rules are needed since the state Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2009 stopped licensing pet stores, he said.

“We have animal control regulations for the county,” he said. “They’re much more robust and what we have had all our communities adopt.”

He added the bills would halt progress made in the past five years in the county.

“I would really hate to start unravelling all that we have done, all of us collectively,” he said.

The bill package, introduced by state Rep. Hank Vaupel, R-Fowlerville, who is a veterinarian, passed the House Agricultural Committee last week and is scheduled for a second reading Tuesday.

The bill is supported by a coalition of pet shop businesses, Protect MI Pets, that says the bills would “establish stricter and more comprehensive regulation” and “establish a strong statewide buying and licensing standard” for pet stores.

It also would eliminate unregulated or bad breeders, and create “one strong, enforceable and statewide standard that ensures animals and their welfare are a first priority,” according to a “get the facts” sheet by the organization.

At a recent hearing in front of the Agriculture panel, a group of the package’s supporters wore T-shirts adorned with, “support responsible Breeders.”

Spokesman Robert Brown said pet shops want to stop the recent-years trend of animal rights activities shutting down pet shops via local governmental units. A pet shop at the now-defunct Gibraltar Trade Center in Mount Clemens was forced to move and then [shut down last year](#) amid legal disputes instigated by Puppy Mill Awareness.

“A small business owner that has poured their heart, soul and life savings into establishing a humane and safe business that operates ethically and within the confines of the law, shouldn’t have to worry that a city council can arbitrarily legislate them out of business,” Brown said.

He added any store that doesn’t “opt in” to the new rules would face local control.

Voting against the bill on the board were Phil Kraft, R-New Baltimore, who also works for state Rep. Pamela Hornberger, R-New Baltimore, who supports the bill. Kraft said.

Commissioner Leon Drolet, R-Macomb Township, said he didn’t want to vote without hearing supporters of the bill speak.

Commissioner Veronica Klinefelt, D-Eastpointe, accused the state of an ongoing effort in recent years to wrest more control from local governmental units such as counties and cities.

“We’re not getting into their business, they’re getting into our business,” Klinefelt said. “It’s been an attack for the last, I would say, about four years on local units of government -- ... bill after bill after bill that prohibits a local unit of government (from governing).

“Every time they do it they’re taking away piece of control that belongs or had always belonged to local units of government. The subject isn’t as important as it is that we stand up and say, ‘Stop doing this.’”

She said the county should pass a resolution to that effect.

Other organizations that oppose bills include the Michigan Humane Society in Bingham Farms, the Humane Society of the United States, the Michigan Municipal League, Attorneys for Animals in Canton, Michigan Pet Fund Alliance in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan Political Action Committee for Animals, and Hayes and Friends in Mount Clemens.

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