

COMMUNITY TACKLES HUMANE WAY TO CARE FOR FERAL CATS

BY JEFFREY STONEHILL, BOROUGH MANAGER

In January 2016, Town Council held a public meeting to discuss the most effective and humane way to care for the feral or wild cat population in the Borough. While there are a lot of opinions, experience in many other towns demonstrates that there are incredible challenges including social, behavioral, financial, and moral issues when dealing with feral cats. This is clearly no simple problem.

Folks who think there are simple solutions, have missed the lessons of dozens of other towns who continually struggle with this problem. Further, while we all might think we understand the problem, our friends, neighbors, and family may see the feral cat issue completely different than we see it. In local government, we must remain empathetic to all points of view; no matter how contentious.

Feral cat issues plague communities and unlike dogs, there is no State-wide or regional solution to this dilemma.

No one law is going to fix this problem.

However, Council did want to point out some helpful concepts to the public while struggling with solutions:

According to the Humane Society of the United States:

"Nuisance behaviors, such as urinating and defecating in someone's yard or garden, digging in someone's yard or garden, jumping on someone's car, and upsetting an owned cat, are the greatest concerns that the general public has about outdoor cats."

"A stray cat is a pet who has been lost or abandoned, is used to contact with people, and is tame enough to be adopted. A feral cat is the offspring of stray or feral cats and is not accustomed to human contact. Feral cats are usually too fearful to be handled or adopted."

"Stray cats may be reunited with their families or adopted into new homes, but feral cats will find it difficult or impossible to adapt to living as pets in close contact with people. But that doesn't mean there aren't many things you can do to improve feral cats' health and quality of life."

"Overpopulation is a serious concern, as well. In the United States, approximately 2 percent of the 30 to 40 million community (feral and stray) cats have been spayed or neutered. These cats produce around 80 percent of the kittens born in the U.S. each year. Although 85 percent of the estimated 75 to 80 million pet cats in the U.S. are already spayed or neutered, many have kittens before they are spayed or neutered. Those kittens, especially if they are allowed outdoors, add to the number of outdoor cats and the problems associated with them."

"Spaying or neutering community (feral and stray) cats using trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs will reduce their numbers over time. Spaying or neutering pet cats before they reproduce will reduce their numbers and help stop pet overpopulation."

"Trap-neuter-return (TNR) is a nonlethal strategy for reducing the number of community cats (feral and stray) and improving the quality of life for cats, wildlife and people. At its most basic, TNR involves humanely trapping community cats, spaying or neutering them, vaccinating them against rabies, surgically removing the tip of one ear (a "tipped" ear is the universally recognized sign of a cat who has been spayed or neutered) and returning the cat to their wild home."

"There are many reasons cat problems are rarely solved by trapping and removing a colony. Community (feral and stray) cats live at a certain location because it offers food and shelter. If a colony is removed, cats from surrounding colonies may move in to take advantage of the newly available food and shelter. The cycle of reproduction and nuisance behavior begins all over again. If all the cats in a colony are not trapped, then the ones left behind will tend to have larger litters of kittens."

"The logic behind bans against feeding feral cats is that if there is no food available, the cats will go away. This rarely happens. First, cats are territorial animals that can survive for weeks without food and will not easily or quickly abandon their territory. As they grow hungrier and more desperate, they tend to venture closer to homes and businesses in search of food. Despite the effort to starve them out, the cats will also continue to reproduce, resulting in the deaths of many kittens. Second, feeding bans are nearly impossible to enforce. A person who is determined to feed the cats will usually succeed without being detected. Repeated experience has shown that people who care about the cats will go to great lengths, risking their homes, jobs and even their liberty to feed starving animals. In addition, there may be more than one feeder and other sources of food, including dumpsters, garbage cans and other animals."

Feeding bans just do not work.

For this reason, the Borough of Chambersburg does not currently have a feeding ban for feral cats. We strongly recommend against the outright feeding of feral cats and instead encourage alternative ways to deal with these animals; such as organizing your neighborhood to establish a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program.

These TNR programs take organization and vigilance. You and your neighbors need to do it as a group. The Borough of Chambersburg cannot organize TNR programs in each neighborhood or monitor their success.

The Borough of Chambersburg has no prohibition on humane trapping of community cats or any animal on your private property. Trapped animals can be brought to the Cumberland Valley Animal Shelter. The Borough does not enter upon private property and trap animals on your behalf.

There is nothing to prevent a cat under someone's care from running at large. However, you can trap it on your property.

- There are no local laws to prohibit cat nuisances such as digging in a garden or leaving urine or feces on public or private property
- There is nothing to permit or prohibit the organization of a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program by citizen volunteers who wish to organize and invest their time in such an activity
- There is nothing to permit or prohibit an impoundment facility from neutering cats under their control or collecting fees for their services
- There are no local laws requiring that cats be kept in or only permitted to be at large in the dwelling of their owner
- There is nothing to prevent the Borough from trapping cats on public property (i.e. a park)
- There is nothing to prevent any citizen from trapping cats on their own private property
- The Borough does not have a feeding ban as they are considering ineffectual
- The Borough does not enter upon private property and trap animals on your behalf
- Cats, owned or community, must be treated in a humane manner

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT ANIMAL CODES IN THE BOROUGH OF CHAMBERSBURG, CALL PHIL WOLGEMUTH, ASSISTANT TO THE BOROUGH MANAGER, AT (717) 261-3232 OR RESEARCH THE MATTER AT THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES:

WWW.HUMANESOCIETY.ORG