

NEWS

BY BEN RICKER

OUT, DAMNED SPOT! OR A MODEST DISPOSAL

Eugene's newest foray into social cleansing targets man's best friend

General Lee is no bigger than a burrito. The couple-week-old pit mix — named for the flame red Dodge Charger in the '80s TV series *The Dukes of Hazzard* — peeks out from behind the zipper of Annamay Bertholf's jacket.

Bertholf's friend, who prefers to remain nameless, just sold his iPod to scrape together enough cash to pay for the pit bull pup's parvovirus shot this morning. Lee yawns himself awake and passes back out.

With two other dogs in tow, Tinkerbelle and seven-month-old Kita Mihart, Bertholf and her friends collect themselves in a darkened alleyway after a cold night sleeping on the streets.

This small human/canine herd could be the target of a proposed city ordinance aimed at shooing undesirables out of the downtown business district by banning their dogs.

"We're trying to address behavior downtown," Mayor Lucy Vinis says. "I think it's worth trying."

If the city goes ahead with it, the ordinance to ban dogs in the downtown core could take effect as early as next month. In that case, all but certain privileged canines — those belonging to area residents and people who work in the downtown core, as well those belonging to the disabled

— will be subject to fines and removal from the dozen or so city blocks in the heart of downtown Eugene.

"The fact that people set up blankets on sidewalks with their dogs, and stay there all day long, that's not the behavior we want," says Eugene's new mayor.

The downtown restriction would be identical to that which prohibits dogs from entering the commercial corridor along 13th near the University of Oregon. Vinis credits the 1996 dog ban for tidying up the West University district.

The downtown ordinance would be up for review in November, she says. "If people are unhappy with it, we can change it."

Vinis doesn't see a problem with adding a minor nuisance code to the current police force workload. "The police are all going to be down there anyway," she argues. "It wouldn't cost a thing extra."

Not so fast, says Ward 1 councilor Emily Semple. The newly elected Semple says she's concerned a dog ban would mean police time and taxpayer money wasted.

Semple opposes the ban, but voted in favor of holding a Feb. 27 public hearing in order to have an open discussion that includes as many community voices as possible. At the same meeting, the city will hear from the public on another controversial ordinance that would make downtown a smoke-free zone.

Think of the time it takes for the cops to stop someone and write a ticket. And what about the signs the city would have to put up? Semple asks.

"It wouldn't cost 'nothing,'" she says.

On top of that, it could prove nigh impossible for the police to enforce.

The second a person says their dog is a service animal, and certainly all dogs downtown are performing a service, Semple says, even if it's only companionship, the police won't be able to do much.

It might not be 100 percent honest, Semple admits, but who wants to be hassled by the cops for walking their dog?

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act protects people who rely on service animals from having to carry proof of their disability. The ADA does not legally require owners to outfit their service dogs with special insignia of any kind, either.

Additionally, cities are prohibited from requiring owners to register service animals.

Semple says she knows there are problems downtown, and that some people report feeling unsafe there. That's why Semple favors opening a community center downtown where people and their dogs could rest and safely set down their belongings.

Why not help by giving people an alternative to clogging pedestrian walkways? she asks.

"We are after a change in atmosphere downtown," Vinis says. "I think it's a good discussion to have. It's about trying to address behavior downtown."

That's certainly not how the homeless see it.

"This is just a backdoor way for the city to fuck with us," Bertholf says.

Bertholf and company come close to crying as they try to describe how hard it is to get by in Eugene without a place to live. The threat of the city's proposed dog ordinance "is almost too much," Bertholf says.

One of Bertholf's friends says he suffers from an anxiety disorder. His dog, the well-behaved Tinkerbelle, is one of life's few steady comforts. She guards his camp at night and can predict oncoming seizures.

He says his mental condition makes him behave erratically sometimes, but having Tink around helps him keep his nerves in check.

When the city talks about making downtown "safe and welcoming for everyone," Bertholf says they don't really mean it.

Bertholf and her group say their lives would be a lot easier, too, if city officials and police focused on illegal activities rather than criminalizing homelessness. Drugs and crime are just as frightening to people who sleep outside, they say, if not more so.

Eugene is as much their home as anyone else's, they argue, and any kind of dog ban is just an indirect way for city leaders to get them to move someplace else.

"I don't always feel comfortable with the way other people dress," Bertholf says, "but you don't see me trying to outlaw crop tops." ■

Eugene City Council hosts a public hearing to discuss proposed ordinances that would ban dogs and smoking in the downtown core 7:30 pm Monday, Feb. 27, at Harris Hall in the Lane County Courthouse, 125 E. 8th Avenue.



HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL

JOSHUA AND BENJAMIN PHELPS

When twins Joshua and Benjamin Phelps were four years old and living in Pittsburgh, their dad Randy Phelps taught them to build a circuit with a battery and a motor. "He got us interested," Joshua says, and two years later the family moved to Eugene, their dad's hometown. "Over the years, we've built many more complex circuits." They ran wires throughout the house for an in-home telegraph system and built an electric airplane that flew five blocks before landing in a tree. As middle-schoolers at Roosevelt, they acquired a programmable Arduino microprocessor to build a solar panel that tracked the sun and a computer cursor controlled by raising an eyebrow. When their father, a doctor at the Child Development and Rehabilitation Center, learned of the nationwide Go Baby Go (GBG) project that transforms toy ride-on cars into mobility vehicles for young kids with disabilities, he alerted his sons. "We went to a workshop and learned to build a car," Benjamin reports, "with a go-button on the steering wheel and a frame for back support." The brothers, now sophomores at South Eugene High School, added a microprocessor and a joystick to make their GBG fire truck more useable for kids like 3-year-old Luca. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy, Luca doesn't walk and has limited use of only his right hand. He has fun driving and socializing, and he gains skills with the joystick that enhance his prospects for a motorized wheelchair in the future. The twins built 10 trucks last summer and introduced the project to the South Eugene Robotics Team, which has built three more. To support the local Go Baby Go effort, visit gofundme.com/e5yh6fss.