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Editorials

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Editorial: King County pet-license plan should be put to sleep

Privacy concerns are being raised by a King County proposal that would put veterinarians on the front line of pet-license enforcement.

Seattle Times Editorial

FEDERAL law protects your medical records from prying eyes, but Fido and Spot aren't so lucky. A proposal from King County animal-control officials would turn every veterinarian in the area into an agent of pet-license enforcement. The vets want no part of it, and it is hard to blame them.

The Regional Animal Services agency proposes that every veterinarian in King County turn over rabies-vaccination records to the county Board of Health. These records contain the names of pets, the names of owners, addresses, phone numbers and emails. With that information, local-government officials can cross-check against lists of licensed pets. Delinquent pet owners can expect letters, a phone call, maybe even a rap on the door.

"I don't want to get into a big-brother thing," says Kenmore veterinarian Mike Bellinghausen, one of the members of the Puget Sound Veterinary Medical Association battling the proposal. Veterinarians also worry that pet owners would be discouraged from vaccinating pets.

The issue deserves a full airing before the County Council, not just the quiet hearing that is anticipated before the Board of Health. This idea looks like a dog.

King County figures about four out of five pets go unlicensed, about a half-million countywide. In unincorporated areas and the 25 cities served by the King County program, dog and cat owners are supposed to buy annual licenses costing \$30 if the animal is spayed and neutered and \$60 if unaltered. Stiff late fees and fines also apply.

What intrigues county officials is that at least 15 jurisdictions nationally use vaccination records for enforcement. Licensing in some has nearly doubled. Boost compliance here to 50 percent and the county general fund could avoid covering a \$2.5 million gap, says Animal Services Manager Gene Mueller.

But mandatory reporting is troubling. As a matter of public record, the central vaccination database would identify every King County pet owner who pays for shots. When a similar program was launched in Oregon's Multnomah County, an enterprising seller of microchip pet-ID tags used the records to create a marketing campaign.

The idea also runs counter to fundamental concepts of public health. Rabies isn't a problem in Washington, in part because nothing deters pet owners from obtaining shots.

The vets have a good point. The county shouldn't look to them to solve a problem with scofflaws.

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