

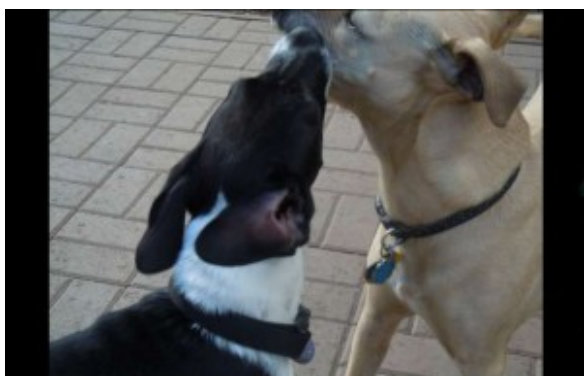
S. Tahoe puts some teeth into dog ordinance

By Kathryn Reed

Less than four months after South Lake Tahoe's less restrictive vicious dog ordinance became the law of the land, the council on Tuesday unanimously agreed to make tweaks to it.

No longer will a hearing officer resolve matters. All dog bite cases will be heard in Superior Court.

"We believe the hearings are too contentious for city staff to hear," Michael Eng in the South Lake Tahoe City Attorney's Office told the council April 2. (Eng has been an intern for the last 15 months and April 3 is his last day with the city.) "People are passionate about their animals. I believe a formal court hearing is the proper venue."



Dogs play at the South Lake Tahoe Dog Park. Photo/LTN file

Dog-on-dog attacks will be labeled as a vicious dog attack. Eng said the community and county were dismayed this had been changed.

While staff recommended the vicious dog designation be made

after two unprovoked dog-on-dog attacks in a 24-month period, the council changed that to one attack in 24 months.

Karen Kuentz, president of Animal Coalition Tahoe and nine-year volunteer at the shelter in Meyers, told the council she would like vicious dogs to have to wear a muzzle off their property. The council did not agree to that.

The ordinance gives judges leeway in making decisions. For instance, with the county ordinance it treats all dog bites as equal. The city ordinance would allow a judge not to punish a dog and its owner if the bite were accidental; for instance if someone is playing tug-of-rope with a dog and the dog in play bites a person. If that person goes the hospital for a dog bite, animal control is called and it becomes a court case. The judge, per city ordinance, can see the gray area of the case and not work in a black and white vacuum.

The city attorney will also no longer have authority in determining when a dog can be released to its owner. The reasoning is that person is no dog expert.

The passage of the original ordinance in November was in large part initiated by then Councilman Bruce Grego. According to an El Dorado County Animal Control officer, his office was not contacted by the city prior to last fall's passage of the ordinance or while it was being crafted.

There has been much contact in the last four months between the city and Animal Control.

Henry Brzezinski, who heads the county Animal Control, told the council, "This is a step in the right direction to deal with some of the issues we've encountered with the new ordinance. The dog on dog is quite important. Our mantra is public safety."

Brzezinski also believes the county dog ordinance is effective and didn't see a need for the city to loosen what was in

place.