

To: The Borough Assembly, MatSu

From: Linda Oxley, Chair

On behalf of Willow Area Community Organization

Re: Guarded Support for Ordinance 10-066 as Written, Addressing Unattended Kennels and Catteries; Amending MSB 24.10.040(B) & MSB 24.05.010Definitions

Date: August 3, 2010

Mayor, Assemblymen, and borough staff, I am presenting guarded support for Ordinance 10-066 on behalf of the Willow Area Community Organization (WACO). We met last night and an active discussion ensued about this ordinance. It is our understanding that tonight some changes will be proposed to the ordinance. Without seeing those officially we are only able to provide support for the ordinance as written. While we do support the intent of the ordinance and recognize the need for it, we would offer some additional feedback that might be useful if you revise any portion tonight and for the rewrite of Title 24 that has been underway for about 2 years now. This feedback is offered because as written we do remain in concern about some aspects of the ordinance as is currently written.

From a loyalty perspective dogs are the only animal on the planet that has adopted the human completely. Every other animal retains elements of independence in their every day interactions with humans. Certainly if dogs are 'freed' they can and will revert to pack mentality and to behaviors that attempt survival. But even the most work oriented dog is loyal to humans. In fact, dogs that do not demonstrate this loyalty are feared, considered 'bad' dogs and often destroyed. And for good reason, as they can be a true safety hazard for humans. For dogs to be tethered in isolated settings with essentially no human interaction is basically animal cruelty. Providing the minimum of required cares of food, water and some semblance of shelter every day should not be considered human interaction. While dogs are loyal to humans, these traits do need to be fostered and rewarded so that, on the rare occasion that they may get loose or be in environments thick with humans, they are safe, can be caught and in fact, careful about those humans. Cats can be very affectionate – when they decide that's what they want to do. They too need human interaction to even get the minimum of loyalty they offer!

Dogs and cats are the two most common animals in households all over the United States. So there are lots of dogs and cats every where, including and maybe especially in the MatSu Valley. Our conversation at WACO was primarily about dogs, as this is the main animal that we have in large volumes.

In Willow, dogs outnumber humans by a large margin. Not only do we have the typical household companion dogs, we also have work dogs: those being guard dogs, hunting dogs, and of course, sled and other snow activity dogs. The range in number of dogs per household is variable from 1 or 2 up to between 100 and 200. It is actually a rare home that doesn't have a dog in Willow. The borough has designated 5 as the magic number that decides if you are a kennel or not. This is fine from a cost/registration point of view. But we hope and recommend that the wording 'kennel' and 'cattery' be deleted from any rewrite of this ordinance. Cruelty and isolation is perpetrated on single dogs and cats as much as on groups of them. Particularly for dogs, being a single dog in an ignored isolation is even more cruel than for a group of dogs to be isolated. And further we would wish that the rules be applied to all animals not otherwise considered livestock.

Very unfortunately the word 'kennel' is often, inaccurately, linked exclusively with dog mushers.

Dog mushers of any repute tend their animals with great attention and care, in particular, working to assure a well mannered animal that is safe with the general public. It is unfair, even if technically correct, for the borough to burden this group with a bad reputation via this ordinance. In Willow, we are particularly concerned about this as we are the community with the largest density of dog teams in Alaska, honored to promote dog mushing which is the Alaska State Sport. We are considered the Dog Mushing Capital of the World and most of us wear that title proudly. As a group, we are the largest employer in Willow. But there are those in Willow and throughout the borough that would like for the state's sport to go away. The reputation of these definitions gives these sports foes ammunition that is unfair.

We have heard that 2 other concepts are still being discussed. The definition of a structure is one. Quite frankly we don't care how the humans choose to live: tents, sheds, ornate log cabins, etc. We do care that there is a human 'living there' regardless of structure. We might recommend that such living arrangements be listed as 'winter worthy and used year round' and avoid the definition of a structure at all. The Animal Control Officers can create their own checklists, descriptors and guidelines that will decide if a person is living there or not. And the other uncomfortable concept is the response time to a posting that a complaint as been made within 24 hours. There are too many valid reasons why a 24 hour communication may not be able to be made. Again, perhaps the checklist, descriptors and guidelines can help an officer dealing with a particular group of animals. In the end, if Animal Control officers believe that animals are in eminent danger, those animals should either be removed from the premises or arrangements made to care for them in place until communications can be achieved. A more reasonable time frame for response might be 3 days with Animal Control providing daily welfare checks.

As a summary statement, WACO guardedly supports Ordinance 10-066, our concerns addressed above. We truly believe that dog and cat owners need to demonstrate responsible care for their own animals and unfortunately it is taking an ordinance to define what responsible care is.