

A Response to
Report for Cat Licensing (City Wide) (PED16208)

That was prepared by Sue Russell, Ken Leendertse and Marty Hazell
Nov. 15,2016

Overview:

- Cat licensing as described here is a form of taxation in which \$85,000 or more would go to administration of the program before 1 cent would be spent to benefit the cats, and any residue would be “directed into a reserve account for managing community cat initiatives”
 - The feasibility of the licensing program cannot be answered as the Report omits any details about how it would be implemented or enforced.
 - The licensing program may have the most harmful effect on the low income families of the City living on tight budgets and limited funds
 - The role of owned cats in the transmission of rabies is a red herring that only serves to play to anxiety in the city.
-

My parents were somewhat frugal; careful, as they put it, with their money.

When I was young and I asked for some money, they always enquired: “What are you going to do with it? What do you need it for?”

We are in a similar situation here. HAS wants money and we need to ask ‘what for?’

The first reason they give is to pay someone to “support the Cat Licensing Program, funded from Cat Licensing Revenue.” But we don’t know what that job amounts to. And if they have money left over (residual) as they expect, then it’s to be spent managing vague initiatives – more administration.

The proposed City of Hamilton Cat Licensing Program, attached as Appendix “A” to Report PED16208 has serious flaws and omissions. It evokes many questions but provides few detailed answers.

In recommending that the Animal Services budget be increased to include one more FTE and that all cat owners pay for cat licenses to cover the expense of additional staff, it states that significantly more cats will be returned to their homes and that profits/residues will serve to provide “community cat management initiatives that assist in providing a healthy and safe community.” (p2) But other

than unsupported opinions, it provides little support for these claims.

It is clear from City records and public statements that the license is intended as a means of generating funds (a form of taxation) from cat owners who are expected to comply with or be forced into licensing their catsⁱ. At best, the proposed licensing program would affect only 7.7% (10,000 cats) of the city's owned cat population (of 130,000) or 3.8% of the total estimated cats in Hamilton.

After a sizable portion of these funds is expended on administrative services, the residue (actual revenues less actual expenses) would either be directed towards unspecified cat management activities not currently existent or, as is suggested later, into a reserve account for managing community cat initiatives," (p.2) or directed to the City's levy (p.8).

Financial Issues:

The Report says that "the recommended \$20 license fee per altered cat could generate approximately \$200,000 annually." Of this, one (1) new FTE (\$85,000 or 42.5%) would be directed towards the administration of the licensing program before 1 cent is spent to benefit the cats. It should be noted that a further FTE (Project Manager – temp) was added to Animal Services budget a year ago to address the same topic at an annual cost of \$107,000.

The Report does not show the additional cost for the development and maintenance of the required financial and identification databases or the expense of annual notices, both of which would further reduce the assumed residual amount actually available for cat initiatives. (Consider that if 10,000 licenses were to be sold the first year and the owner information recorded in a database, a clerk would have to continuously input an account every 12 minutes for 37.5 hours/week for 48 weeks, without interruption, to establish the database.) It should be noted that HAS has a history of problems in this regard. For instance, HAS continues to be "working to resolve many issues that have still not been resolved since (it) launched (their) new online licensing system earlier this year." ⁱⁱ

As well, the Report assumes that 10,000 licenses can be sold in the first and successive years but it does not tell the Committee how 10,000 owners would be identified in the first years while respecting issues of privacy and avoiding 'bad press.' It does not take into account how many of the projected licenses would actually be sold in the first few years or how any deficit will be made up. Would any shortfall be held against sales in future years?

The Report recommends a \$45 fee for unaltered cats but does not note that these cats can be neuter/spayed for a cost as low as \$20 and then be licensed for \$20, which would result in a saving of \$5 for the owner in year one and \$25 in subsequent years. For example, the HBSPAC currently offers spay/neutering at \$20 for those in inner city neighbourhoods, and this includes Rabies vaccine, FVRCP vaccine, Microchip and Revolution treatment.

Implementation:

The Report addresses implementation in vague generalities, providing no information as to how the by-law would be enforced and how potential owners/licenseses would be identified. Would names and addresses obtained from other sources (e.g. adoptions through independent organizations), which should be considered private and confidential, be used in enforcement? Already, HAS is trying to get identifying information from rescue groups as to who adopts their cat.

I wonder whether there will there be more aggressive procedures of enforcement that will force the public to get licenses. Will staff be assigned or temporary staff (such as summer students) hired to go door-to-door asking residents if they have any cats or about neighbours' animals?

What would happen if cats without a license are found on the street or reported by citizens? Will they be caught and transported to the shelter or will they be left on the street since the revised policy of HAS is that "community cats should not be brought into the shelter unless they are sick, injured, or aggressive cats and could pose a danger to the public." Would unlicensed strays brought to the shelter be accepted or refused. Currently, the public is told "not to bring in cats they think are lost." (Intake to the shelter (2015) has dropped to only 35% of what it was 10 years ago.)

It is unclear, based on the assumption that significant net revenue would be generated, how these residual funds would be directed, as it proposes, "to enhance community initiatives (through) such as subsidized spay / neuter programs, rabies and microchip clinics for the City's vulnerable citizens "(p.8) Since none of these services are currently provided by the City, would private animal welfare organizations (e.g. Rescue Groups, HBSPCA) who currently offer such services, be expected to continue carrying the entire burden alone? Will funds/grants be given to these organizations?

For years, as this Report acknowledges, "euthanasia was the solution to control the overpopulation of unwanted cats... past practice within the City of Hamilton was to trap and euthanize any unowned cats. This practice did nothing to manage or control the expanding cat population."(p.6) But this proposal, with its vague, nebulous, undefined "responsible pet ownership education program," offers no concrete solution as to what it would actually address, what would it cost and how would it be delivered.

Public Impact:

A significant number of Hamiltonians are near or below the poverty line and in most cases, these people love their pets and are already 'responsible owners.' Any added cost (even at an unspecified discounted fee in some cases) would deter them from owning or adopting cats, or drive them underground.

What does Animal Services intend to do about low income people currently looking after cats who can't afford the license within their limited budgets? Will they issue fines the owners can't pay? Or demand that they surrender their cats (at fees they can't afford)? Or fill up the shelter to the brim with them, expecting HBSPCA to and Rescue Groups to somehow find homes for them in addition to the overwhelming numbers they're already struggling to rehome? Or would they have to revert to euthanasia?

More generally, it is a demeaning attitude to think that citizens can be tricked into accepting, as the Report puts it, "a positive message such as, 'My licence is my ticket home', rather than an enforcement type approach of 'it is the law'". (p.5) The Report repeatedly reveals the 'it's the law' reality of its intention when it refers to the "implementation of a mandatory Cat Licensing Program." Hamiltonians are too smart to accept this attempt at rebranding.

It further states that "cat owners would be educated on the benefits of licensing their cat and how their licensing fee would help the cat community." (p.5) But the only unique benefit offered is that, if found or caught, the cat would get "a free ride home" (which sounds more like a slogan for MADD than an animal service.) While microchipping is considered by many as an equal or improved way of identifying a cat, it should be noted that a cat with a microchip does not get the free ride. Will cat owners really care about a free ride home when the fact is that the license fee is really just a new "mandatory" tax?

Rabies:

The Report introduces a 'red herring' topic when it states, at length, that "the City of Hamilton is currently facing a rabies crisis." It states that there is a significant risk for the residents of the City to contract rabies if the steps and recommendations of the Report are not followed. However, there is no support for labeling the situation as a crisis or for associating it with cats.

To put the matter of domestic cats and rabies in context, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States reported, for 2014, (the most recent year available) that, of the 445 rabid domestic animals reported throughout the whole of the US, with a population of 325 million people, only 272 were found in cats.ⁱⁱⁱ The rabid cat found in Haldimand-Norfolk last summer marked Hamilton's first case of domestic rabies in over two decades. While HAS states that it is imperative that all cats, owned and unowned, be vaccinated to prevent the spread of rabies, the proposed Cat Licensing Program has nothing to do with rabies. It erroneously claims that "Cat licensing could help to protect the community against rabies" (p.8) while it offers no means of ensuring "that all owned cats are vaccinated against rabies." It merely plays on any anxiety that citizens in the city may have in order for this motion to be passed.

Conclusion:

Cat owners by and large love their cats. They want their pets to get home if they get lost or loose.

They pay their vet bills, buy the food, clean the litter boxes.

And they have genuine concern for the unowned and homeless community cats who suffer from starvation and the cold.

This Report and proposed motion does not address their concerns or the fundamental issues of cat welfare and overpopulation in Hamilton. Animal Services, in downplaying the fundamental issue of cat population, ignores the fact that most people (including their constituents) love their animals and those in the neighbourhood. Some (possibly many) would contribute money if they could see that money being used to reduce the population so that fewer would struggle and suffer. But they hesitate, even resenting in some case, money going to administrative costs and vague initiatives.

As I was taught, if I wanted help, I should explain what I wanted to do and then the other party could decide whether to support it or not. HAS needs to treat its citizens with respect, be clear and detailed in its intentions and then ask.

ⁱ Calculated from information in Cat Licensing (City Wide) (PED16208)

ⁱⁱ Karen Edwards, Animal Services Advisor, Personal Communication November 11, 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/location/usa/surveillance/domestic_animals.html

Presented by George Matheson to the Planning Committee of the City of Hamilton on Nov. 15, 2016