

From: Paul Bigioni
Director, Corporate Services & City Solicitor

Subject: Urban Farming
- Backyard Egg Production
- File: S-3010

Recommendation:

1. That Report AS 01-23 be received; and
 2. That an urban farming pilot project not be implemented at this time.
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Executive Summary: Further to Council Resolution #100/23, staff have investigated the introduction of an urban farming pilot project, including a backyard chicken program. Animal Services and Office of Sustainability staff have prepared individual reports.

Having reviewed both the challenges and benefits of introducing this pilot project, staff recommend that an urban farming pilot project not be introduced at this time.

Staff carried out an extensive stakeholder consultation involving all levels of government. Staff and stakeholders have identified serious public safety risks due to the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus (HPAI). This is the primary reason for the recommendation not to proceed. It must also be noted that the introduction of an urban farming pilot project would require additional staff resources and shelter space to process, monitor and ensure animal welfare.

Financial Implications: None.

Discussion: The City's Exotic Animal By-law 7110/11 prohibits the keeping of livestock, such as chickens in any urban area within the City. To undertake an urban farming pilot project, By-law 7110/11 would need to be amended, and a new regulatory framework would need to be created to establish standards of care for keeping chickens, and property standard requirements for the construction, size and location of coops (including distance from neighbours and other structures). A process for licensing and inspection would also be required to minimize complaints, ensure public health and safety and animal welfare.

Additionally, keeping chickens in urban areas could exacerbate existing wildlife feeding issues, resulting in increased rat and rodent populations, as well as unwanted predatory wildlife activity, including foxes and coyotes.

The increased risk of fire is another potential concern. Chicken coops are generally heated by heat lamps and these, in combination with straw or other bedding materials can be a risk for combustion. For this reason, further consultation with Fire Services would need to occur prior to implementing a pilot program.

In Pickering, there is limited availability of veterinarians accredited to care for chickens. As a consequence, residents may experience a lack of support in their efforts to successfully keep chickens, and the animals may suffer unnecessarily for want of appropriate care.

It must also be noted that the proper care, nutrition and housing of chickens requires investments that must be considered by the home owner, including:

- cost of building an adequate shelter and secure fencing to deter wildlife;
- cost of purchasing chickens;
- time for daily chores such as feeding, collecting eggs, cleaning;
- cost to dispose of manure (if excessive and have more than residents can use);
- veterinary costs; and
- cost of proper disposal of carcasses.

Lastly, animals need access to clean, fresh water on a daily basis. In the winter, that may mean installing systems to prevent the water from freezing. What chickens are fed will also affect their health and their ability to produce good quality eggs. A chicken's normal diet consists of mixed grains and oilseeds, including corn, soybeans, wheat, barley, and canola, as well as minerals and nutrients. Although food scraps and grass clippings are often fed, they are not recommended and they do not provide the adequate nutrients necessary to raise a healthy chicken.

A. Stakeholder Consultation and Best Practice Scan

Staff carried out an extensive stakeholder consultation process involving all levels of government (Municipal, Regional, Provincial and Federal) as well as the agricultural community through the Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee.

With the outbreak of Avian Influenza in Ontario, staff met with all levels of government to discuss concerns related to public and animal health. During these discussions, there were concerns expressed regarding the large number of infected birds that were located during this migration season. Public Health organizations expressed concerns regarding backyard chickens that could contribute to infectious disease transmission to humans.

At the November 12, 2020 meeting of the Clarington Agricultural Advisory Committee, Committee members re-stated their position on the same issue in 2010, which did not support allowing chickens on non-agricultural lands in the municipality. The minutes were approved at their December 2020 meeting.

At the May 9, 2023 Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee meeting, the Committee recommended that backyard chickens not be supported within Durham Region on non-agricultural lands. This recommendation will be considered by Regional Council at their next scheduled meeting. A municipal scan revealed that there are currently no municipalities along

the Durham lakeshore that allow the keeping of chickens in residential areas. The Municipality of Clarington examined the matter in 2021 and the Town of Ajax in 2022, and both municipalities declined to proceed with any kind of backyard chicken program.

Although the City of Toronto implemented an Urban Hen pilot program in 2018, a staff report released on April 12, 2023 recommends that the pilot program end, and consideration for further extension, expansion or making the program permanent be paused indefinitely. The report identifies the considerable costs and staff resources required to safely and effectively run the program, combined with the current risks avian influenza virus (HPAI), as the rationale for their recommendations.

B. Public Health and Welfare

Public health and welfare are an important concern when considering keeping chickens in urban areas. Public Health Ontario published a research brief in 2017 which concluded that close contact with backyard chickens may contribute to infectious disease transmission from birds to humans, even in the absence of illness in poultry.

Salmonella lives in the intestines of infected chickens and can be shed through droppings. Humans who handle birds or clean their enclosures can be exposed to the salmonella bacteria and suffer severe gastrointestinal illness. Biosecurity measures may limit or prevent the introduction and spread of infectious agents; however, various studies noted limited awareness regarding backyard chickens and zoonotic diseases among flock owners.

C. Avian Influenza (HPAI)

As reported by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Avian Influenza is a disease caused by a virus that primarily infects domestic poultry and wild birds such as geese, ducks, and shore birds. HPAI H5N1 is a strain known to kill both wild birds and commercial poultry.

In March 2022, HPAI H5N1 virus had been detected in Ontario in wild and commercial poultry. This same strain of the virus has also been found in many other jurisdictions across the world, including in other Canadian provinces and American states. Although its spread has been primarily attributed to the migration of infected waterfowl, it is expected to remain a threat for quite some time.

In March, 2023, municipalities within the GTA began to see the presence of HPAI in wild birds. In addition, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency reported that the increase in reported cases of HPAI serves as a strong reminder that avian influenza is spreading across the globe, and that anyone with farm animals must practice good biosecurity habits.

D. Considerations regarding the implementation of a Pilot Project

Possible benefits of a pilot program include:

- Fertilization for gardening (ground up eggs shells and feces);

- Educational opportunities (teaching children about where food comes from, and providing animal care experience);
- Greater control over egg source in order to know where the egg originated;
- Increased food security, although limited, when financially feasible to keep chickens;
- Modest reduction of carbon emissions associated with transporting food such as eggs;
- Companionship for family members, as chickens may be treated as a pet;
- The belief that eggs will be fresher, taste better and will be pesticide free;
- The expectation of better conditions for hens as compared to industrial farms; and/or
- Possible reduction of municipal solid waste through consumption of table scraps and other organic waste by hens.

All that being said, many of the benefits outlined above can be obtained by purchasing eggs from retailers who source certified organic (cage free, free roaming or born free) eggs which are harvested in an environmentally friendly manner.

Possible problems caused by a pilot program include:

- Increased complaints of noise and odours;
- attraction of rodents and other wildlife;
- Food safety issues (egg safety, unlawful sale or redistribution, potential for disease transmission);
- Inadequate disposal of chicken waste (methods of disposal, odours and groundwater contamination);
- Whether chicken are kept in coops or allowed to range free, there is a significant risk of attraction of pests and predators, including mice, rats, squirrels, raccoons, foxes, skunks, coyotes and snakes, which would pose a threat to the chickens themselves, and increase the risk of disease transmission;
- Inappropriate chicken slaughter (illegal slaughter and improper methods of euthanasia); and/or
- Inadequate care of chickens (potential for disease transmission from sick hens).

Since the City's existing animal shelter lacks adequate space to safely house sick, injured or stray chickens, additional space would be required for this purpose. The *Animals for Research Act* (Ontario) obligates the City to ensure that chickens could be safely housed and poses a health and safety risk to any other animals in the care of the shelter.

Given the public health risks and other potential detrimental impacts on residents, staff recommend that the City not proceed with an urban farming pilot project.

Attachments:

1. None.
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Recommended for the consideration
of Pickering City Council

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