

RE: June 21, 2023 COW - Agenda Item 12.2: Member Motion - Regional and Local Councillor DiPaola - Pilot Project - Re: Allowing Residents to Have Hens in Residential Zoned Areas

Dear Mayor, Council and Staff:

It has come to my attention that a motion which proposes a pilot program for backyard hens is being brought forward at this week's Council of the Whole meeting. I would like to take this opportunity to express my serious concerns about implementing such a program at this time in Richmond Hill.

With the serious concerns about Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Virus (HPAIV), which can spread rapidly and has the potential to cause harm to many species of local and migratory wild birds, wildlife, domestic pets as well as the hens themselves, I don't think this is the time to be considering this. There have also been subtypes of HPAIV-A strains that have been virologically confirmed to have infected humans.

The World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH founded as OEI) is the intergovernmental global authority on animal health. They recently hosted their first Animal Health Forum dedicated exclusively to discussions about the ongoing avian influenza crisis and its threat to public health, wild and domestic bird species, other mammals, livelihoods and food security. In their article, *"Avian influenza and wildlife: Risk management for people working with wild birds"* (WAOH, 2022), which outlines risks and recommendations using a One Health approach, WOAHO outlined the following concerns:

"The recent outbreaks of avian influenza virus strains of the subtype H5N1 have raised concern for wildlife conservation due to their unusual impact on wild birds, including several endangered species, and transmission to mammals. The most recent wave of infection spread began in October 2021, and to date thousands of outbreaks (including poultry and wildlife) have been recorded worldwide. Events have been predominantly reported in North America (56%) and Europe (34%). In addition to massive mortalities in seabirds, aquatic birds, and raptors, there are reports of infections in wild mammals such as foxes, otters, and seals, which is relatively unusual for H5 strains. Although the current outbreaks have been linked to a low number of human infections, involving mild symptoms, all H5N1 strains pose zoonotic risks."

Notably, On April 12, 2023, the City of Toronto **concluded** a similar backyard hen pilot program with a decision to **pause the program indefinitely** due to significant concerns about the risks from HPAIV as well as unexpected animal services oversight costs, including licensing, enforcement and compliance with the Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act (PAWS, 2019) which helps ensure that animals are protected and treated in a humane manner.

Ensuring the welfare of these hens would require that Vaughan Animal Services, a significant stakeholder in such an initiative as our animal services provider, have the staffing and resources to provide adequate oversight and enforcement of the PAWS legislation. This includes, but is not limited to the following "five freedoms":

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
2. Freedom from discomfort - by providing a suitable environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animals' own kind.
5. Freedom from fear and distress - by ensuring conditions that avoid mental suffering.

To enjoy the Five Freedoms, hens need shelter, food, water, adequate space, environmental conditions (such as adequate ventilation and light) conducive to good health, and the opportunity to socialize and engage in fundamental behaviours, which, for them include scratching (foraging by scraping the ground with their claws), roosting (resting on a stick or branch), and dustbathing (thrashing around in the dirt to clean feathers and remove parasites.)

Additionally, "Freedom from pain, injury and disease" requires that a veterinarian, who identifies as treating Small flock Poultry, be enlisted by residents when their hens are ill or injured. The most current CVO registry lists only THREE such veterinarians within a 50km radius of Richmond Hill:

- One in Beeton (45 km away)
- One in Caledon (45 km away)
- One in Kleinburg (20 km away)

I respectfully request that these serious concerns be taken into consideration when this motion is presented. It is my opinion, as well as that of many experts, that this is not the time or place to move forward with such a proposal. I implore you to consider the possible consequences, not only to public health, but to wildlife, our pets and to the hens themselves as you deliberate the purported "value" of such a program in Richmond Hill.

Respectfully yours,

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