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BE OUR GUEST: Garo Alexanian, animal-policy expert

Vallone's bid to ban pit bulls ignores real problem: owners

It bewilders me when those in political power try to "better" our world without giving due consideration to all the facts. Councilmember Peter Vallone Jr.'s proposal to ban "pit bulls" from New York City seems to be such a case.

I would like to discuss some statistics culled from the New York City Health Department, the National Centers for Disease Control and a variety of other experts, to help clarify the complicated issues involved in attempts to legislate dog-human behavior.

The mixed-breed dog is the type of dog most often involved in inflicting bites to people. The purebred dogs most often involved are German shepherds and chow chows. Does Vallone propose that all mixed-breed dogs be banned as well? Or that German shepherds and chow chows be banned as well as "pit bulls?"

How about Dobermans, Rottweilers, mastiffs, and even some of the toy breeds that also have high incidents of dog bites? If not, why not? Where is the logic of banning only one breed when half a dozen others also have high incidents of attacks? The city would have to ban 50-75% of dogs to come close to eliminating all dog bites.

In recent years, the term "pit bull" has come to mean any dog with a square head. So the term has become a misnomer, no

longer meaning a full breed American bull terrier (American Kennel Club) or American pit bull terrier (United Kennel Club in England). Legislation based upon such undefinable terminology is a formula for disaster.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has documented that a chained dog is 2.8 times more likely to bite than an unchained dog.

Targeting specific dog breeds will not work

If Vallone truly wished to reduce dog bites and fatalities he should be proposing an anti-tethering ordinance, as the state of California enacted on Jan. 1, 2007 and as many other communities have already done.

Canines not spayed or neutered are three times more likely to bite than sterilized dogs. If Vallone truly wished to reduce dog bites and fatalities he should be proposing a local law requiring any person harboring, walking, or in possession of a dog to have

proof of alteration with a fine for failure to do so.

While "pit bulls" and Rottweilers account for most of the serious injuries, of the 27 people who died as a result of dog bite attacks in 1997 and 1998, 67% involved unrestrained dogs on the owner's property and 11% involved restrained dogs on the owner's property.

If Vallone's desire is to reduce serious dog attacks, he should be proposing legisla-

tion requiring "pit bull" and Rottweiler owners to attend dog-ownership classes within one month of acquiring a dog or have the animal seized and the person fined.

From 1979-98, at least 25 breeds of dogs have been involved in bite related deaths. "Pit bulls" and Rottweilers were involved in slightly more than 50% of these incidences. Are we supposed to accept the other 50% of serious dog attacks as acceptable? Or are we supposed to ban the other 25 breeds as well?

These facts clearly illustrate that simple solutions applied to complex issues can cause more harm than good. Bites and maulings *must* and can be reduced and perhaps almost completely eliminated, just as rabies has been.

However the simplistic approach of breed-specific banning of dogs will not work. Targeting legislation at the dog is another example of our government leaders' punishing the victim instead of the tormentor and then claiming to have "done something" about the issue.

Irresponsible "pit bull" owners are the cause of this problem and any legislation should be directed at them — not the dogs.

Garo Alexanian has degrees or post-graduate studies in zoology, psychology, and biology. He was the architect and primary force behind the transition of animal control services from the ASPCA to the New York City Center for Animal Control.