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GERSHWIN HEADLINES

Edmonton Symphony Orchestra showcases the razzle-dazzle of George Gershwin. See story on page 31.

Let me tell you 'bout the birds and the bees

St. Albert council asked to consider allowing urban hens, bees, other fowl

BY VICTORIA PATERSON
Staff Writer

Perhaps it was to be egg-spected. Advocates of urban agriculture have been clucking at councils across Canada to allow residents to have backyard livestock such as hens.

Places such as Vancouver have allowed urban hens for a few years, while Edmonton is currently running a pilot project for urban hens and has allowed backyard bees across the city after finishing a pilot project for urban hives earlier this year.

It now appears it could soon be St. Albert's turn to start buzzing with the backyard hen-and/or-bees debate.

If Danielle Kiesman and Radelle Rombough get their way, that debate will have its day in council chambers sooner rather than later in the botanical arts city.

The pair attended last week's council meeting and asked council members to consider starting the process to change the city's bylaws to allow for urban fowl, including hens and other birds, and backyard beekeeping.

In an interview, both Kiesman and Rombough, as well as fellow enthusiast Billie Milholland outlined why they'd like the chance to keep the birds and the bees in their backyards.

"My first reason would be for a healthy source of food where I know how it was produced," said Rombough.

"You know where everything came from," said Kiesman.

"Food security is kind of the big overarching reason for something like this," Milholland said.

The three have been doing a lot of research on keeping hens, other fowl and bees in urban yards.

There are some misperceptions out there about having backyard fowl or bees, they said.

In particular, backyard chickens have a bad rap for being smelly or noisy. Kiesman said that isn't really the case.

"They don't smell as long as you clean out their pen," Kiesman said. Nor are they that noisy – no one's asking for roosters to be allowed to give city dwellers their early morning wake-up calls.

For people worried about bees, they said their research shows as long as you leave the hive alone, there shouldn't be many worries about being stung – claims backed by those who've raised bees.

Worried about living beside bees or fowl? The hyperlocal food production might lead to some sharing, Kiesman suggested.

"If you're the neighbour of a hen

keeper or a bee keeper, gifts may be given to you," Kiesman said.

Milholland predicted bees or hens could be better neighbours in some places than some particularly rambunctious dogs.

Other benefits for the would-be hen and beekeepers include compost from the chickens, and pollination for neighbourhood plants from the bees.

That's besides the most obvious output: eggs and the honey.

"There's no describing the wonderful flavour, it's not anything like an egg that's been sitting," said Milholland.

"A full hive can give you way more honey than you'll ever need," said Rombough.

Kiesman's been researching how to get backyard fowls and bees in St. Albert for several months, and has found out the easiest way to get things changed is for council to direct a change to the land-use bylaw.

Milholland wasn't able to attend the council meeting, but in particular wants to raise chickens, though she's raised bees before.

Something that excites her is many of the people agitating for urban agriculture are young people who are a generation or two off the farm. She was happy to see good attendance at recent urban agriculture discussion meetings in St. Albert.

"I was surprised at the number of people and the wide age range," she said.

Several people echoed the trio's opinions about the potential benefits of chickens and bees, as well as sharing the desire to see them allowed in St. Albert.

Neil Korotash teaches urban agriculture at a Morinville high school and is a long-time St. Albert resident who'd also like to see chickens and bees allowed.

He's frustrated with the bylaws in St. Albert. Chickens are clearly not allowed, he said, but his interpretation of the land use bylaw is that it's silent on bees, which he thinks means they should be allowed. The planning department disagrees.

"I don't think they have the authority to do that," Korotash said. He's been working with the planning director to explore some options, but many of the processes will take several months he said.

That means it will likely be too late to get bees this season even if the easiest way to change things – a motion from council – is passed soon, he said. Korotash is a former city councillor and familiar with how the land use bylaw change process works.

"I'd want chickens and bees," Korotash



CHICKEN EXPERT – Chicken expert Rico Sebastianelli poses with one of his Cochin chickens at his home on Thursday. Rico is an award winning chicken breeder and judge.

said, though he might have some other barriers to that dream.

"I often joke that it'd be easier to convince council to allow chickens than my wife," Korotash said. He'd at least like to have the chance to talk his wife into it.

He quoted benefits of compost, access to fresh eggs, pest control and fun as reasons to have chickens.

For bees, advantages include a hobby element for fun, but it also helps protect the declining bee population and, of course, the access to honey.

"Call it a trend, call it a fad, whatever it is it's popular," he said of the rise of urban agriculture.

"We've got a whole generation of people now that maybe didn't grow up with a garden and they're rediscovering the joy of being outside and growing your own food," Korotash said, noting a recent "foodie" trend as well.

There's increasing interest in sustainability too, he said.

Director of planning and development Carol Bergum said her department does interpret the land use bylaw as not allowing bees.

"If something is silent in the land use bylaw, it is not permitted," she said. They do have some discretion for what would be considered an agricultural use in areas zoned as urban reserves.

Changes to allow backyard chickens, other fowl and bees in residential areas

would require updates to the land use bylaw, Bergum said.

"It would probably involve a few changes to both (the land use bylaw and animal control)," she said.

Edmonton recently finished a backyard bee pilot project and amended its animal licensing and control bylaw to permit beekeeping in the city.

Jocelyn Crocker is with an organization called YEG Bees, which advocated in Edmonton for backyard hives to be allowed.

She was part of the successful pilot project, and pointed out that bees and their pollination activities are integral to the production of many crops.

"If you don't have bees, you don't have food," she said.

Edmonton's rules around bees including taking a course, she said, and she'd suggest any aspiring beekeepers find a mentor.

"As a best practice, there's too much to know to learn on your own," she said.

Legalizing backyard beekeeping would help facilitate those mentorships and other supports, she said. That's why her group pushed for legalization in Edmonton.

"When beekeeping is underground it's really hard to meet people and to be mentors and to ask questions and to share information ... but once it's legal, that can come out in the open," she said.



Currently, he has six hives that he keeps outside of city limits on acreages in Sturgeon Valley.

"I find them fascinating," Ramsden said. He's learned about how they organize themselves and how they interact with their environment, he said, noting a newfound appreciation for dandelions and thistles.

He took a course in Olds and is now in his second year of hobby beekeeping.

Taking care of the hives is pretty straightforward, he said. There are two main things to learn.

Don't panic

"The first thing is to not panic when you're surrounded by bees, and the second thing is to learn the types of things to look for," he said.

Key to the latter is having a mentor and learning opportunities.

Ramsden took a *Gazette* photographer and reporter out to two of his hives for this story. While they weren't at the peak population yet — Ramsden estimates at their peak, each of his hives will have a population of 60,000 bees — there were tens of thousands of bees. No one was stung, even when the hives were opened up for photography purposes.

He thinks the St. Albert rules should be handled through animal control like Edmonton's was, not through the land use bylaw.

Ramsden praised the Edmonton bee pilot program and the resulting bylaw update.

"I think it's high time that the City of St. Albert copied them," he said.

Rico Sebastianelli raises chickens at his farm near Bon Accord. He's a chicken judge and one of the top breeders in North America.

He called the idea of urban backyard chickens in St. Albert "a very good idea."

He extolled the virtues of fresh eggs, and you know what you're feeding the chicken. They'll even eat some table scraps like potato peels or apple peelings, he said.

Crocker said bees get a bad rap because many people confuse them with more-aggressive wasps. Honeybees aren't interested in you unless you're putting nectar and pollen on your food, she said. Most people stung by honeybees have stepped on them.

"To quantify how docile they are, last year we had over 150 people participate in hive inspections and none of those participants were stung," she said. She personally spent the pilot project time with her two young children sharing a yard with hives, and they weren't stung.

"The biggest risk is to the beekeepers," she said.

Toby Ramsden is a St. Albert resident who would like to see the rules changed in St. Albert.



BRYAN YOUNG/St. Albert Gazette
BEE HIVES — Toby Ramsden poses for a photo with one of his beehive frames on Friday afternoon. Questions have been brought to council recently about allowing more forms of animals and insects within St. Albert, including honey bees and chickens.

Parents can use the opportunity to help teach their children about responsibility by having the kids help care for the hens, he said.

Sebastianelli could instantly spout out some potential breeds that would work for backyards, like Rhode Island Reds and other heritage breeds, or smaller bantam hens.

It's not too much trouble to take care of a few chickens, he said.

"You don't need anything fancy," he said, noting you need some wire, a nest box, some feed, some shelter and some shade.

Ashley Currie, an Edmonton resident, has three chickens as part of the ongoing pilot project.

"It's been a really neat experience," she said, adding her kids love the chickens.

Neither she nor her husband have ever raised chickens before, and they've found the actual care of the fowl relatively easy. They did research, and built a coop and a chicken run. She said Edmonton does have space requirements for the urban hens.

She's surveyed her neighbours — her backyard actually touches five other properties — and found no one seems to have any complaints about her chickens.

There's no noticeable smell as long as their areas are cleaned regularly, she said, and she can't even hear them clucking away once she's inside her house.

Her family is hoping backyard hens are approved after the pilot ends, she said.

At last Monday's meeting, no councillors gave immediate notice of motion on the topic of urban fowl or bees. That doesn't mean they won't — Rombough and Kiesman said at least one councillor has offered to meet with them after the pair's public request.

That doesn't mean the topic won't start St. Albert residents clucking — or buzzing — if and when the debate begins in earnest at St. Albert Place.

tpaterson@stalbert.greatwest.ca

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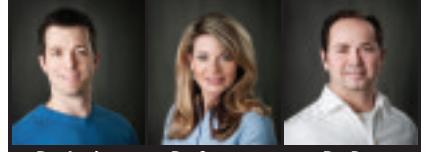
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