

## PROPOSAL TO ADD A COMMUNITY CAT PROVISION TO LEE COUNTY ANIMAL CONTROL ORDINANCE

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Lee County Health Department officials are concerned about potential rabies exposure to people in Lee County. In 2014 a rabid skunk and a rabid cat were identified in Lee County, one on either side of a highly populated commercial center and a couple of community cat colonies. The Health Department will host public forums June 23rd and July 14<sup>th</sup> to educate citizens about the risks of rabies in regards to community cats. The Health Department Director will propose some changes in the Lee County Animal Control ordinance that will enhance rabies control in the county, and is requesting input from citizens and stakeholder groups about the proposed changes. The Lee County Health Department will present proposed changes dealing with community cats to the Lee County Board of Health and the Lee County Board of County Commissioners for inclusion of a Community Cat Provision in the existing Lee County Animal Control Ordinance.

Lee County Health Department is responsible, by state law, for ensuring the public is safe from exposure to rabies. State law also requires pet owners to vaccinate their pets (dogs, cats and ferrets) for rabies. There is, however, an ongoing situation of lost, unwanted, and stray cats in the community that live in Lee County's local outdoors with little to no support from people. The status of some of these cat's rabies vaccinations are unknown. Some of these cats are tame or partially tame and with some care, can be conditioned to be adopted as pets. Some of these cats, however, have become fearful of humans and avoid humans like other wild animals. They are known as *feral* cats. In some cases these different types of cats are collectively looked after at a single location by people and are known as community cats.

In response to the plight of community cats, certain people take it upon themselves to support community cats by feeding them and providing them crude shelters. These shelters are often clustered together in areas know as cat colonies. If the cats in these colonies are simply fed, they will multiply and create a cat population that will grow rapidly. The higher the population of unvaccinated cats, the higher of risk of rabies exposure to humans. Most community cat care givers support having these cats spay/neutered and vaccinated for rabies.

Research in Animal Science and Veterinary medicine has shown that if cats are trapped, neutered/spayed, and then returned to their colony, the cat colony's population will get smaller and smaller as they eventually die off of natural causes. The process is called TNR (Trap/Neuter/Return) and has been demonstrated to reduce the number of cats ending up in county animal shelters and other animal rescue outlets. During the process, the cats are also vaccinated for rabies and other feline diseases, and the tip of one ear on the cat is cut off (ear tipped) to help identify them as being part of a TNR program.

In order to reduce the risk of rabies exposure to humans from lost, unwanted, stray and feral cats the Lee County Health Department is proposing to include a Community Cats Provision to the Lee County Animal Control Ordinance that will include a TNR feature. The intent of modifying the animal control ordinance is to set up a structure that allows better communication between local health/law officials and the cat care givers in the community. The proposed changes will also address some liability and property owner issues.

The Community Cat Provision will call for the establishment of a registration process where individuals or groups that are engaged in TNR throughout Lee County can register with a central sponsoring organization that has been identified and nominated by the individuals and/or groups supporting TNR activities for community cats. The Nominated Community Cat Sponsoring Organization (NCCSO) will be recognized by Lee County Animal Services, a joint service provided by the Lee County Sheriff's Office (Animal Control) and the Lee County Health Department (Animal Shelter).

As part of the proposed provision the NCCSO will make information about TNR, rabies laws and rules, and placement of community cats available to the public. Should the animal shelter receive a community cat they will contact the NCCSO who shall attempt to notify community cat care givers of the situation. The NCCSO shall act as the single point of contact between Lee County Animal Services and the Community Cat care givers in the area regarding TNR cats that have been picked up, calls about cats at large, and calls about stray cat complaints. By NC state law, a person who is bitten by an animal with the potential to carries the rabies virus, domestic or wild, is required to call the health department and report the bite as soon as it happens. This law will not change even if the community cat initiative is adopted.

Responsibilities of Community Cat Care Givers will be:

- Cats must be trapped using humane trapping techniques.
- Cats must be assessed by a veterinarian and deemed healthy at the time of spay/neuter surgery.
- Cats must be spay or neutered.
- Cats must be vaccinated for rabies and FVRCP (Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis, Calicivirus, and Panleukopenia).
- Rabies vaccines must be kept up to date for each community cat.
- Cats must be ear tipped *and* microchipped.
- Cat bites must be reported to Lee County Animal Control or the Health Director.
- Community cat care givers assume post- bite rabies prophylaxis liability for the cats that they feed and/or shelter that are not kept up to date on their rabies vaccines unless the nominated community cat sponsoring organization has assumed that liability backed by liability insurance.
- Cat colonies may not be located on state or local government property unless a waiver is issued.
- Community cat care givers must obtain written permission from commercial or private property owner(s) to place community cats on their property. Copies of the written permissions must be kept on record at the Lee County Animal Shelter.
- A community cat care giver may regain possession of an impounded community cat within 72 hours or three business days after notice of impoundment is given to the NCCSO if they have demonstrated they are in compliance with all applicable state laws and rules and local ordinance provisions, and, after paying any necessary capture, shelter or veterinarian fees.
- Community cats picked up by Animal Control for causing a nuisance will be not be released unless arrangements are made through the NCCSO to relocate to a different setting where they will not create a nuisance.
- Community cats are not to be located in or near subdivisions, neighborhoods, schools, commercial centers, along walking trails, or other places of mass (human) gatherings.
- Community cats that are ear tipped and microchipped shall not be impounded for not wearing a rabies tag. However, such a cat may still be impounded if a complaint is lodged against the cat

under other applicable state rules and laws or provisions of the local ordinance regarding animals or pets.

- No community cat care giver may be permitted to adopt his or her own animal from the Lee County Animal Shelter in order to reclaim a cat that has been impounded under provisions of state law or the Lee County Animal Control Ordinance.

The objective of these modifications is to reduce the risk of rabies exposure to the citizens and visitors of Lee County. Written comments or questions generated from the Lee County Community Cat forums will be received up to two weeks following the forums by the Lee County Health Director, Mr. Terrell Jones, by email at [tjones@leecountync.gov](mailto:tjones@leecountync.gov) or by mail c/o Lee County Health Department, PO Box 1528, Sanford, NC 27331. Information submitted to Mr. Jones will be shared with other Lee County offices/boards following each of the two public forums. Additionally, the Lee County Board of Health and Lee County Board of County Commissioner meetings will provide opportunity for public comments at the beginning of their announced meetings.