

Public Hearing on Proposed Ordinance for Feral Cats

August 7, 2012 at 6 p.m.

Members Present:

Joe Owens, Mayor
Boyd Jones, Mayor Pro-Tem
Abbott L. Bray, Jr.
Eric L. Fowler
Casey Jordan Hallman
L. Dale Harley
Tommy Parler
B.J. Unthank
Teddy Wingard

Members Absent:

None

Others Present:

Jenny Cunningham, City Administrator
Myron Corley, Deputy City Administrator
Mardi Valentino, City Clerk/PIO
Donna Smith, Director of Economic Development
Sid Varn, Director of Planning and Engineering
Dennis Tyndall, Police Chief
Mark Jones, Police Captain

Rick Hodge, City Treasurer
Wyatt Coleman, Fire Chief
Brian Carter, Director of Planning and Zoning
Charles Garren, Public Works Director
Stuart Jones, Building Official
Matt Edwards, Police Major
Members of the Public and Press

Agenda Item I – Call to Order

Mayor Owens called the public hearing to order at 6 p.m. and noted a quorum was present. *The State, Free Times, Lexington County Chronicle, Cayce-West Columbia News, and The Columbia Star* were notified of the public hearing by e-mail on July 18, 2012 and August 3, 2012. A notice was published in the legal section of *The State* newspaper on July 22, 2012.

Agenda Item II – Opening Remarks

Mayor Owens stated that Council Member Abbott L. Bray had provided information of a proposal to amend the animal control portion of the West Columbia Code of Ordinances to establish a Trap, Neuter and Release (TNR) program to deal with the feral cat population in West Columbia.

Agenda Item III – Public Comments

Mayor Owens asked if members of the public had comments or questions about the proposed ordinance.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Nancy Brazell who stated that she lives at 628 Ashwood Circle in West Columbia. Ms. Brazell said she is a resident of Hulon Green and when she first moved into the subdivision she noticed a lot of feral cats roaming the neighborhood. The cats have become a nuisance and have been aggressive toward her children. Feral cats carry diseases and damage property. She said people feed the feral cats, which is against the law and the subdivision rules. She asked council members to not adopt any program that would allow the feral cats to continue to roam freely in the neighborhoods.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Michael House who stated that he lives at 1308 St. Andrews Road in Columbia, SC. Mr. House said he maintains five feral cat colonies which have shrunk in size over the years. He said the kittens can be socialized to enable adoption. He endorsed the TNR program as a way to get the problem under control.

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Agenda Item III – Public Comments (continued)

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Eva Turner who stated she lives at 114 Monarch Lane in West Columbia. Ms. Turner said she was a staunch supporter of the TNR program as a way to humanely improve the lives of the feral cats.

Mayor Owens recognized Mrs. Cathy Novinger, who stated that she owns a business at 602 Meeting Street in West Columbia and serves on the West Columbia Beautification Foundation. Mrs. Novinger said she understood that the room was filled with people with good intentions. She and her husband made a huge commercial investment in West Columbia because they liked the government's policies and procedures. Feral cats roaming the city do not support the Beautification Foundation's mission for the quality of life in the city. She said feral cats are destructive and cause unsanitary conditions because cats carry infectious bacteria. Mrs. Novinger explained that she looked up the word feral in the dictionary and found that it means to turn back to an untamed or wild state of nature. She asked council to consult with the city's animal control staff before making any decisions to allow feral cats to continue to roam the city.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Leon F. Moore who stated that he lives at 407 Heatherwood Court in West Columbia. Mr. Moore said he has a problem with a next door neighbor who feeds feral cats that live in nearby storm drains. Male cats are vicious. The cats come into his yard and leave their waste. He said West Columbia Animal Control has helped him with trapping and picking up the cats.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Barbara Moore who stated that she lives at 752 Teakwood Court in West Columbia. Ms. Murray said residents have other animals that come into their yards such as snakes and raccoons. She said she loves animals, but cats that keep breeding cause problems. She advised that controlling the birth rate of the cats would eventually eliminate the problem.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Karola Clark who stated that she lives at 114 Ken Webber Road in Irmo, SC. Ms. Clark said stray cats start out as people's pets and are thrown out when people no longer want to care for them. She noted that she is from Germany where the TNR program has been in place for 30 years. She said the feral cat problem should be looked at as a moral issue and people in animal rescue need resources through government to help with the problem.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Morris Phillips who stated that he lives at 105 Ashley Court in West Columbia and has encountered bad experiences with dogs, cats, and opossums, but animals can be wonderful companions. He said he had been listening to the people speaking both for and against TNR. The response by the audience with clapping and cheering for their side is turning people in the community against each other. He suggested that people not applaud after people speak.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Gene Ray who stated that he lives at 220 Alexandria Street in West Columbia. He said a feral cat feeding station is located at the corner of Alexandria Street and D Avenue on property in Lexington County just outside the city limits. People come from Irmo and Columbia to feed the cats and they release the cats from traps before animal control can pick up the traps. Mr. Ray stated that the city has a leash law for animals that includes cats. He wanted the feeding stations removed from his street so cats would stop urinating on his porch furniture and breeding under his windows.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Jimmie Ewing who said she was speaking on behalf of her mother Estelle Ewing who lives at 618 Ashwood Circle in Hulon Green. Ms. Ewing said the city has been trapping feral cats for years and the proposed ordinance would help trap the cats in the neighborhood, have them spayed or neutered and vaccinated at no cost to taxpayers.

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Agenda Item III – Public Comments (continued)

Mrs. Ewing explained that over \$40,000 has been collected to support the TNR program. She also noted that there are non-lethal ways to discourage cats from coming into yards. Ms. Ewing said at the end of two years the city can determine if it wants to end the TNR program.

Mayor Owens recognized Mrs. Leona Blackburn who states that she lives at 402 Heatherwood Circle in West Columbia. Mrs. Blackburn said she moved to Hulon Green Subdivision for the peace and tranquility, but feral cats live in the sewer drain across the street from her. She said the cats come into her yard and lie under her birdfeeders to catch birds. She requested a cat trap from animal control which caught a cat, but a nearby neighbor came into her yard and released the cat before it could be picked up. She said people also spray the traps so cats won't go near them. Mrs. Blackburn said all residents should obey the laws. She said she can no longer enjoy her yard because the cats have become such a problem.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Christine Pease who stated that she lives at 219 Derby Circle in Columbia, SC. Ms. Pease said she is doing what she can to assist with cat rescue. She explained that cats seen in neighborhoods are abandoned animals that are not afraid of humans. Feral cats are not socialized and will not walk up to humans. Ms. Pease said animal rescue groups do not have the support to solve the problem, but the TNR program does work. She said citizens all over the Midlands who help the cats are fearful of the fines imposed by governments for assisting the cats.

Mayor Owens recognized Mrs. Darlene Cox who stated that she lives at 1500 Robincrest Drive. She read the lyrics from a song about blessing the beasts and children.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Mary Dennis Cauthen who stated that she is the president of the Humane Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (HSPCA) and lives at 1426 Summerville Place in Columbia. Ms. Cauthen said many people take care of feral and stray cats. Spaying and neutering reduces cat colonies through attrition. HSPCA at 121 Humane Lane in Columbia operates educational programs, assists people taking care of feral cats and does cruelty investigations.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Robert Wise who stated that he and his wife have lived at 1028 B Avenue in West Columbia for 56 years. He said he has had animals in the past and the last several years he has owned cats. Mr. Wise said his son-in-law is extremely allergic to cats and cat fur. He obtained a cat trap from the city and took a trapped cat to the shelter. He noted that something needs to be done for the people who live in the community. Instead of people letting their cats roam outside they should keep their cats in cages when they let the cats outside so the cats will stay on their owners' properties.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Kim Kelly who stated that she is with the SC State Humane Society and lives at 209 Major Drive in Charleston. She explained that TNR is the most effective way to reduce the feral cat population and to monitor disease control. Cat colonies will become healthier when females are spayed. In 2010 the City of Charleston and Charleston County passed a TNR ordinance which has significantly reduced the feral cat population.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Frankie Johnson who stated that she lives at 1130 Evergreen Avenue in West Columbia. She became involved with feral cats about 11 years ago when she founded Sunset Felines. Ms. Johnson explained that feral cats do not have contact with humans. The cats people see in the neighborhoods are animals left behind by owners. She said she did not keep records the first five years, but Sunset Felines has spayed or neutered 557 cats from January 2006 through December 2011. She noted that with the help of many dedicated volunteers the number of feral cats in the feral cat colonies has decreased. Ms. Johnson stated that euthanasia is not the answer to the feral cat problem.

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Agenda Item III – Public Comments (continued)

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Tracy Johnson who stated that she is a members of Pawmetto Lifeline, which is located at 1275 Bower Parkway in Columbia, SC. Ms. Johnson said the room was full of people representing 503 (c) organizations that support animal rescue. She stated TNR is a scientific fact that has been proven over time. She explained that if feral cats are removed from an area other feral cats will move into it. She noted that no government has the funds to solve the feral cat problem through euthanasia. She suggested that government move forward with modern methods of reducing the feral cat population.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Jane Brundage who stated that she is a founder of Pets, Inc., an animal adoption agency that has been operating for 20 years and is now located at 300 Orchard Drive in West Columbia. Ms. Brundage said West Columbia has an opportunity to come together as a community to take advantage of the knowledge of experienced people. Private financing is available and professional people are willing to help with maintaining a TNR program to reduce the number of feral cats. She said that people on both sides of the issue have valid points, but this is an opportunity that can not be overlooked. She said the city would have two years to determine if the TNR program can be effective.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Craig Jumper who stated that he lives at 1004 Fontana Drive in West Columbia. Mr. Jumper declared that he has put up with everyone's dogs and cats for 40 years. He asked council to find another way to deal with feral cats without killing them. He noted there seems to be a lot of professional money available that can help solve the problem. He stated that he wished government would get together with people to do something.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. Wayne Brennessel who stated that he lives at 131 Clubhouse Drive and is the director of the Humane Society. Mr. Brennessel said that in five years one male cat and one female cat can produce over 7,000 offspring. He said TNR has proven to be effective and is the best way to reduce feral cat populations.

Mayor Owens recognized Mr. James Slice who stated that he lives at 305 Hudson Street in West Columbia. Mr. Slice said that he has had problems with feral cats and animal control has helped him. He stated that it is not fair for people who do not live in the neighborhood to come feed the cats. He has to clean up cat poop in his yard before he can even let his dog outside. He also pointed out nothing would prevent people from other places coming into West Columbia and dropping off cats to get rid of them.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Barbara Bennicker who stated that she lives at 1813 D Avenue in West Columbia. Ms. Bennicker said she has a trap in her yard and when she catches one she takes it to the vet to be spayed or neutered and receive shots. She stated that killing cats is not a solution to the problem. TNR is the most effective method. She suggested that West Columbia become modern like larger cities that have TNR programs in place.

Mayor Owens recognized Ms. Pam Jackson who stated that she lives at 301 S. Harden Street in Columbia, SC and is the founder of Carolina Cats. She said she has been involved with feral cats for 20 years and believes in TNR. She said the concern about cats carrying diseases would be lessened because the cats would receive shots before they are released. She said she even took care of cats while she underwent cancer treatments and never had any problems. She said under the current restrictive ordinance people cannot actively care for feral cats without the risk of fines. She said the TNR program is being offered for free and the city has nothing to lose by trying it.

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Agenda Item III – Public Comments (continued)

Mayor Owens stated that the public comment portion of the public hearing was closed. He thanked the people for coming to speak to council about the proposed ordinance to establish a TNR program. He said no vote would be taken this evening on the ordinance, but council members would consider all the comments made by members of the public. Mayor Owens asked if council members had any questions or comments and received no response.

Agenda Item IV – Adjourn

Mayor Owens declared the public hearing on the proposed ordinance to establish a TNR program for feral cats to be closed. The council adjourned the public hearing at 7:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Marta M. Valentino, CMC
City Clerk