22nd September 2020

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RE: Golden Plains Shire Council Draft Local Law 2 – Part 3 - Animals

To whom it may concern

First and foremost Animal Care Australia (ACA) would like to express our dismay at the difficulty in being able to find the appropriate lodgment information for your consultation, and also for each of your represented Councillors.

It is beyond comprehension that a Council would instigate and implement restrictions on numbers of pets/animals able to be kept by its residents, especially without consultation with expert organisations. ACA strongly encourages all councils to promote and encourage the keeping of animals as pets as they provide extraordinary mental health benefits for all of us. Any restrictions only serve as a detriment to pets and those wishing to keep them.

ACA does not agree with imposing blanket limits on numbers of animals that can be kept especially when based solely on land size such as is specified in table 1 of the draft.

Animal welfare is NOT about numbers – it is about the conditions, behavior, cleanliness, housing and husbandry that each animal is kept under by the owners – your residents.

Policies that restrict keeping of animals on the basis of preventing noise, odour or other issues for neighbours are strongly discouraged. Restrictions including permit requirements inflict an unnecessary compliance burden on residents and staff which only discourages animal keeping needlessly. Laws are already in place to deal with neighbourhood nuisance issues including matters due to poor animal keeping practices.

ACA is currently recognised by **Agriculture Victoria, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions** Animal Welfare Legislative Reform as a key stakeholder in their new animal welfare legislation and will be directly consulting and advising during that review, including revising codes of practice for the keeping of all pets.

ACA recommends Council deletes Objective 2 (e) (vii) replacing it with the following as an additional objective OR included as an introduction to Part 3.

"Golden Plains Shire Council acknowledges the importance animals play to the wellbeing of our residents. Council's default position is to encourage and promote the keeping of animals within the shire."

In addition, ACA seeks further explanation on the details of the training and expertise of Council's "Delegated or Authorised Officer" to verify the level of expertise being applied regarding Animal Nuisance under 26(f) and Animal Enclosures and Agistment under 27(a). These require very specific skill sets – one's ACA seriously doubts are employed within Council.

ACA has the following comment and recommendations in relation to particular species:

Birds:

ACA strongly opposes specifying bird number limits for any property with an area exceeding 1000 square metres (0.1 ha).

A variety of avian species are routinely kept in Victoria and every species has its own management, husbandry, enclosure size and welfare requirements. Many species are best kept as a community, with others kept as bonded pairs. The understanding of their welfare and which applies to each species is best understood by their keepers – NOT BY COUNCIL! Land or enclosure size is an unreliable indicator of noise or odour. Recommended enclosure size varies considerably, along with diet, breeding capacity, and the ability to move excess newly bred birds, making the restriction of numbers extremely unwise.

Small mammals:

Rats, mice and guinea pigs are primarily indoor pets and invariably kept in small enclosures. These animals do not exhibit extreme noise, are not intrusive and are free of the diseases and pathogens that often plague their wild counter parts. In fact they pose no health problem to their owners and are renowned for keeping themselves well groomed. For the Club registered breeding community the proposed limitations are also unrealistic, especially given the average litter size for some of these species is larger than the proposed limit suggesting that these proposals have not taken into account the biology and needs of some species. Additionally, due to their short life-spans it is vital that several adult pairs be kept at any given time to ensure that the quality of the gene pool is maintained – without allowing owners to keep 'breeders' the health of the species will invariably suffer. Owners of these smaller pets work to improve the quality of the animal in health and temperament and ACA has policies for registered breeders who are bound by their published Code of Ethics and Code of Practice along with provisions provided with the current Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act.

It is our stance that these limits are unrealistic. Many of these animals are colony animals, and it is important for their health and well-being to be kept in larger numbers than your policy imposes. In addition the proposed policy goes against scientific research (*Short Communication: Rats Demand For Group Size - Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science 7 (4) 267-272 – 2004*) into ideal colony numbers for rats, which have demonstrated that the numbers in your policy are not compatible with the fulfilment of basic social needs and high welfare standards. As companion animals allowing more appropriate colony sizes poses no threat to community, health or animal welfare

Dogs and Cats:

Acknowledges some change has been made by Council to increase the numbers on larger properties to 5 – we do not understand or agree with the limit of 2 on land sizes greater than ¼ acres. This simply defies logic, particularly if your primary reasoning is 'land size'. It should be noted ACA opposes the limits imposed by the Victorian Planning Department and has written to pursue that further.

Horses and livestock:

The limited number of animals permitted to be kept in columns 3 and 4 of Table 2 is unrealistic for the size of the property. The draft laws do not take into account the management system of the animals, the type of property (whether the land is cleared and level, or bush and steep, or contains waterways), and the welfare needs of the animals. The number of animals is simply irrelevant, it is really about how the property is managed and whether the animals are managed in a way that improves the land or degrades it.

A property that is properly set up with equicentral, cell grazing or other rational grazing systems can support many more animals in higher welfare conditions, than poorly maintained land with set stocking of only 2 animals. Proper grazing management also protects properties against fire, and limiting numbers of animals will lead to higher fuel loads and neglect of harder to manage areas, as land owners focus on the easier and cheaper to manage areas. This comes to the detriment of native species in the area, as well the human inhabitants and their horses and livestock.

Horses and livestock are herd animals, and should be kept in groups of more than 2 to meet their welfare needs and herd dynamics. The numbers in columns 3 and 4 should be multiplied by 3 to be realistic and best practice for welfare. Not doing so will create new welfare issues for the animals in your shire.

The draft laws proposed only serve to punish good land managers, and negatively affect the welfare of their animals, and the productivity and appearance of their land. At worst it is discrimination of small acreage owners, preventing them from following proven farming principles utilising grazing behaviours of horses and livestock to properly manage their grazing lands.

Quality rural fringes like the Golden Plains Shire are diminishing and poor acreage property planning such as these proposed animal numbers is contributing to the degradation and misuse of land, further feeding the perception that animals are to blame for the loss of land quality. This is a misconception, and can be rectified with education - of councils as well as of land owners.

Instead of limiting the numbers of horses and livestock to unrealistically, unhealthy and poor welfare standards, council could invest in property management programs and workshops for acreage owners in the Shire. Courses that educate those who are new to the rural lifestyle on how to manage small acreage with animals, identify grass species and weeds, how to protect waterways and natural resources, and preserve native animal habitats on their land has been hugely successful in NSW and Victoria, with little to no cost to participants. These programs are easy to run, and encourage land owners to see the value of their investment, and take pride in looking after the land and their animals to a high standard. This benefits everyone in the shire, not just those that live there, but for tourism as well.

As stated previously, ACA has references to support our submission, and will be happy to supply them on request. Should Golden Plains Shire Council wish to persist with your current policy restrictions ACA offers our expertise to recommend more suitable categories, land areas and less restrictive numbers.

We can also provide contact information for small property management consultants and educators who would undoubtedly be more than happy to assist you,

Imposing number restrictions IS an animal welfare issue!

Number restriction of animals is unwise and poses an animal welfare issue and ACA will continue to ensure this matter is addressed during our consultations with Victoria Agriculture, Victoria Planning and Community Development and Local Government Victoria.

Please do not hesitate to make contact if we can assist further.

Kind regards,

Michael Donnelly
President
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