



OPPOSED: Susan Murphy, a dog breeder who lives in Cypress and opposes the bill, kisses Macey, a 6-year-old female bull terrier.

CINDY YAMANAKA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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What would it do?

Assembly Bill 1634, also known as the California Healthy Pets Act, requires virtually all dogs and cats in California to be spayed or neutered by the time they're 4 months old.

Intact permits: Exceptions are made for licensed breeders, purebred show animals, police dogs, service dogs for people with disabilities, or any animal a licensed veterinarian says is unsafe to fix. The cost of such an "intact permit" exempting an animal from being spayed or neutered would be determined by the city or county.

Visitors: Nonresident owners who bring animals into California are not required to buy an intact permit if they can provide proof that their pet is in the state temporarily for a "legitimate reason" – such as training or showing.

Penalty: Pet owners who violate the law would face a \$500 fine. Revenues from this civil penalty would go to enforcement of the law and community outreach.

Enactment: If approved by the Legislature and governor, this law would go into effect April 1, 2008.

Source: AB 1634, Bill analysis by the Assembly Appropriations Committee

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Spay, neuter law divides pet lovers

Supporters say the mandate for owners to fix cats and dogs is needed to control shelter populations.

By BRIAN JOSEPH
The Orange County Register

SACRAMENTO – Orange County may be home to an author of the California Healthy Pets Act, but dog and cat lovers here are as bitterly divided over proposal as they are across the state.

The act, formally known as Assembly Bill 1634, would require most dogs and cats in California to be spayed or neutered by the time they're 4 months old. It was developed largely by Orange County resident Judie Mancuso and Los Angeles Animal Services general manager Ed Boks.

Are you for or against AB1634? The California Healthy Pets Act would require the spaying and neutering of most cats and dogs by the time the pet is four months old.

For

Against

A well-organized network of supporters, which includes shelters and veterinarians across the state as well as government officials such as Santa Ana Police Chief Paul Walters, say the proposal will reduce the number and cost of animals euthanized in California.

Loosely organized opponents, who also include veterinarians and animal rescue volunteers as well as breeder groups, say it's a draconian mandate that only hurts responsible owners.

"It's amazing," says Democratic Assemblyman Lloyd Levine of Van Nuys, who is shepherding the proposal through the state Legislature. "People on both sides of the issue are really rallying and just have really deep held passions."

Levine and other lawmakers have received thousands of letters from both camps (including letters of support from the band INXS, the wife of Cesar Millan, television's "Dog Whisperer," and Hollywood stars Pierce Brosnan and Diane Keaton).

Two separate Web sites, cahealthypets.com and ab1634.com, describe competing views of the bill, which also drew hundreds of people to an Assembly Appropriations Committee hearing on the proposal this month. Anti-AB 1634 buttons are being sported by scores of dog show presenters while Web sites devoted to dog clubs sport messages urging members to fight the

bill.

The debate has become so intense, some people are hesitant to say where they live for fear their homes or businesses will become targets.

"I knew it would be big. I didn't think it would be this big," said Levine, a veteran lawmaker who carried arguably the Legislature's biggest bill last year, cable television deregulation.

The Healthy Pets campaign, led by Mancuso, estimates 800,000 dogs and cats end up in taxpayer-funded shelters every year and more than half are euthanized. The cost: an estimated \$258.1 million annually.

"If you don't care about the ethical aspect," Mancuso said, "care about the money."

Supporters point to Santa Cruz County, where, according to an Assembly analysis of the bill, the number of sheltered animals decreased 60 percent and the number euthanized decreased 75 percent eight years after the county enacted a similar proposal in 1995.

The bill makes exceptions for licensed breeders, purebred show animals and service dogs used by police or the blind. Pet owners who can demonstrate that they're breeders or that their pets meet the criteria for show or service animals can purchase so-called "intact permits" to allow their pets to remain unaltered.

The bill also exempts animals that a veterinarian says is too old or sick to fix.

"Nobody is going to be criminalized," said Orange County resident Sharon Hayhoe, who owns four dogs. "As a Republican, if I thought this bill was punitive, I wouldn't support it."

But opponents say it's heavy handed and ill advised – and they have a litany of reasons why. They say a \$500 fine for not fixing your animal will encourage many owners to relinquish their pets, flooding already crammed shelters. They cite a 37 percent decrease in shelter impounds when California's population has grown from 20 million to 36 million.

They say a new law won't make some owners responsible.

"They're already not licensing their dogs!" said Susan Murphy, a Cypress breeder of bull terriers. "They're going to hide. They're not going to spayed or neuter their dogs."

Opponents also say the law does nothing for feral cats, which they cite as a big driver of euthanasia numbers, and fear its premium on purebreds will lead to the end of mix-breed animals. Many also say it's developmentally or even physically unsafe to mandate that all animals be fixed at four months old – veterinarians should make that call.

"When you neuter a dog at four months old, it remains a puppy forever," said Genny Wall of Laguna Hills, a pet lover who has volunteered extensively with animal rescue groups.

But most of all opponents say the proposal is not fair, that it's another example of "nanny government" and Sacramento needs to get its nose out of their business.

Mancuso's response: "This is not a refrigerator. This is not just 'my property.'"

Levine said the bill will move to the Assembly floor soon.

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