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## Views mixed on pit bulls in light of recent attacks in Schuylkill County

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Jack Jones shudders when he recalls a pit bull attacking him Sunday near his Pottsville home.

"I'm standing there talking," he said. "It bit me. He came up, bit me in the back."

In contrast, Kristi Touchinsky, Orwigsburg, fondly remembers Lucy, her pit bull that died in February at age 13.

"She would sleep with us. She would kiss you to death before she would bite you," Touchinsky said of her former pet. "I never feared that she would bite me."

It seems everyone has an opinion about the dogs called pit bulls, a generic name for a few types of dogs that have received significant attention in Schuylkill County - and Pottsville in particular - following four recent attacks.

The attacks, three in Pottsville and one in Tower City, prompted city officials to have a dangerous dog ordinance drafted, which will be discussed at Monday's City Council meeting.

"It's going to define a dangerous, vicious dog," Thomas J. "Tim" Pellish said.

Pottsville police have not filed charges in any of the three attacks, and a spokeswoman for Magisterial District Judge Carol A. Pankake, Tremont, said no charges have been filed in the Tower City incident.

Pellish said the proposed ordinance will not specify pit bulls or any other breed of dog to be dangerous, a proposition that suits Lisa Peterson, director of communications for the American Kennel Club.

"We're against any legislation that bans specific breeds," Peterson said. "No dog is inherently dangerous."

One problem with a breed-specific ban would be agreeing on what exactly a pit bull is, since pit bull is a generic term, Peterson said.

"It's very hard to label a dog a pit bull," she said.

Dogs called pit bulls include American Staffordshire terriers, American pit bull terriers and Staffordshire bull terriers, according to Peterson.

Other experts on dogs agree that the major problem with pit bulls is that their owners do not know how to handle them and have made them into animals that are feared and despised by many people.

"The breed is not bad. It all has to do with irresponsible owners," said Diane Buhl, New Ringgold, a state dog warden. "Unfortunately, some irresponsible people are breeding them for the wrong reasons.

"It's a status symbol," she said. "They think they look tough."

Buhl said one common myth about pit bulls is that their jaws lock, which is not true. Pit bulls are terriers, which were bred as hunting dogs, and they have the characteristics that go with that type of animal, Buhl said.

Jean Thomas, New Philadelphia, owns two male pit bulls, Salem, about 15, and Sluggo, about 5 1/2.

"My dogs are fabulous," Thomas said. "My dogs are good with everyone and everything."

Thomas said she took her dogs to an obedience class, a step she recommends for every dog owner regardless of breed. She also said anyone who wants to own a pit bull should to do his or her homework, since it is a dog that does not lie around the house.

"Make sure before you get it that you research the breed," she said. "They like to have things to do."

Thomas said pit bulls have been used as therapy dogs, drug dogs and search-and-rescue dogs.

Not everyone believes the problem lies solely with dog owners, however.

Colleen Lynn, Austin, Texas, survived a pit bull attack in 2007 in Seattle, and later founded DogsBite.org, a website that chronicles attacks by such dogs.

"The pit bull problem arose ... because of the severity of the attacks. They are a fighting breed," Lynn said.

Owners do play a role in creating problem pit bulls but are not by any means the entire problem, she said.

"Genetics matter. Pit bulls bite unlike any dog breed," Lynn said. "They were selectively bred to fight and attack. That's what the breed does."

Jones said the dog that attacked him had become worse over a period of time.

"We could not sit in the backyard," he said. "He's vicious."

Jones said he had to get a tetanus shot and is still suffering.

"I'm all black and blue. There are about six or eight bites in the back," he said. "My leg was bleeding. I have it all wrapped up. I can still walk on it but it burns."

Lynn said mandatory sterilization of pit bulls can ease several problems without stirring as much controversy as an attempt to ban the animals.

"Nearly a million unwanted pit bulls are euthanized each year. The breed currently takes up the lion's share of resources at shelters across the country," she said.

Bret Hopman, manager of media and communications for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, agrees that the breed is the most common in animal shelters. There are a couple reasons for that, he said.

"It's a tough breed to handle for some folks," Hopman said. Additionally, pit bulls have larger litters than many dogs, with as many as 10 puppies per litter, he said.

A spokeswoman for the Hillside SPCA, Pottsville, said many of the dogs they get are pit bulls.

"We see pretty many on a regular basis," she said. "We have several here now."

More than 50 percent of the pit bulls they see are strays, while others are brought in because their owners are moving, she said.

"The landlord won't let them keep the dog," she said.

Lynn said the Army and Marine Corps have banned pit bulls and other dangerous breeds from base housing areas.

The law Pellish is drafting would not ban any breed of dog but would define a vicious or dangerous dog as one that has bitten, has threatened to bite or has been trained to bite a person or domestic animal without provocation.

"It can be applied equally to all dogs and all dog owners," she said. "There are clearly people out there who consider their dogs weapons and not family companions. It's never the dog's fault."

The U.S. Postal Service does not track the breeds of dog that bite mail carriers, instead emphasizing the prevention of bites by any dog, said spokesman Raymond V. Daiutolo Sr.

About 5,700 of the more than 4 million people bitten by dogs in 2010 in the U.S. were mail carriers, Daiutolo said.

"Our goal is to help our customers understand what they can do to ensure that their dog doesn't injure someone," he said.

Thomas J. Newell, Perkasio, a lawyer who handles dog bite cases across Pennsylvania, said the state, not municipalities, should act to restrict pit bulls.

Newell said the breed is the problem.

"The problem is pit bulls. They are attacking the young and old," Newell said.

Pennsylvania law already restricts dogs that have been determined by a court to be dangerous, requiring owners of such canines to post signs, fence their properties, put muzzles on their dogs and carry insurance, Newell said. A local law cannot contradict that by restricting a specific breed.

However, for pit bulls, more is needed on the state level, he said.

There's no accountability for the owners of such animals, Newell said.

The four recent attacks by pit bulls in Schuylkill County include:

June 22; Fleet Street, Pottsville; three children attacked and injured by pit bull; dog shot and killed.

June 23; North Jackson and East Market streets, Pottsville; 8-year-old boy bitten in right arm by pit bull.

June 28; Tower City; 47-year-old woman attacked and injured by pit bull.

July 3; West Norwegian Street, Pottsville; Jack Jones, 80, of Pottsville, attacked and bitten by pit bull. Recent pit bull

#### attacks in county

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