

Freemansburg dog bite victim says Pennsylvania dog laws don't do enough

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Greg Gregor had always feared he — or worse his wife — would be attacked by one of their neighbors' two dogs.

Both the pit bull and the Dogo Argentino were often allowed to run off leash in their Freemansburg neighborhood.

The pit bull once attacked another dog on the street and it had lunged at his wife several times, Gregor said. The dogo, a large, muscular dog weighing 110 pounds, had bitten a teen in the neighborhood over the summer.

Gregor takes precautions to avoid them. He always takes his own dog, Annie, a yellow Labrador retriever, out the back door for walks. When he gets home, he'll first look for the pit bull or dogo before getting out of his car.

He didn't see either dog out when he pulled in front of his Juniata Street house Feb. 25. His wife, Eileen, was with him, and as she started to the house, the dogo attacked.

Eileen was able to turn around and avoid the dog's ambush but Greg wasn't so lucky. The dogo bit him hard on the right arm and knocked him to the ground, cutting and bruising his head.

He's now waiting to see if the dog will be deemed a so-called dangerous dog, which would be determined by a district judge. A hearing date before a judge had not been scheduled.

If deemed dangerous, the dog will be required to always be on a leash and muzzled when outdoors.

But Gregor says that's not enough. He says state law should allow for a dog to be confiscated after a single attack if it's serious enough.

"What I'm being told is until this dog inflicts serious injury on another person again, it can't be taken away," said the 63-year-old retired information technology professional. "PA claims it has tough dog laws — I'm calling B.S. on that."

Law differs in N.J.

New Jersey does allow dogs to be killed after a first attack if it's serious enough. That was the result in a 2004 incident in Knowlton Township in which three bull mastiffs mauled a 5-year-old boy, causing injuries that required eight hours of surgery.

"That little boy got torn up pretty badly. They were pulling at him like a rag doll," said James Pfeiffer, the township's prosecutor.

Both Pfeiffer and Thomas Newell, a Bucks County attorney who specializes in dog bite cases, said even when dogs aren't confiscated, their owners often get rid of them if they're deemed a dangerous dog in Pennsylvania or a so-called potentially dangerous dog in New Jersey.

In New Jersey, the owners of potentially dangerous dogs must pay an annual registration fee to their municipalities, build a fence the dog can't jump over or dig under, post signs advising of a dangerous dog and carry liability insurance of sometimes up to \$1 million in coverage, Pfeiffer said.

Pennsylvania also requires that signs be posted, a \$500 annual fee be paid, as well as liability insurance coverage up to \$50,000, Newell said.

"It's very strenuous," he said. "The dog is often put down for financial reasons or liability reasons or fear that the dog will bite again."

Pfeiffer said he's also seen several cases in which dog owners willingly put down their dogs based on the severity of a bite, especially if it was inflicted on a family member or friend.

Gregor has strong doubts his neighbors will get rid of their dog or even keep it leashed and muzzled. The family has been cited twice for failing to keep the dog confined when they lived in Upper Saucon Township in addition to often keeping them off-leash in Freemansburg, Gregor said.

"It won't last. They won't do it," he said. "The problem is these people are too irresponsible, so it's not enough."

'He's just a puppy'

The neighbors, Gary Rivera and Wanda Lugo, said they intend to keep the dogo — named Bruno — both muzzled and on a leash. Both were in use during a visit from a reporter last week.

They've also signed up Bruno for an obedience course and say his incidents have to do with the 1-year-old dog's young age.

"He's just a puppy — he's learning," Rivera said.

Rivera's teen son had Bruno out in the yard the day he bit Gregor. The dog ran off before the son could catch him, Rivera said.

"If my kids are outside and they take the dog out, I have no control over that," he said.

Rivera and Lugo say they've apologized to Gregor and hope the situation can be worked out despite the neighbors' history of disputes.

"I hope nothing happens to our dog — he's part of our family," Lugo said.

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