



To: Health and Human Services Committee

Chairperson: Thomas J. Mazur

I have taken an active role on the Community Cat Committee put together by Councilman Darius Pridgen in the City Of Buffalo. This committee is made up of legislative aides, animal welfare professionals, and a law professor from UB who provides legislative expertise as it relates to local ordinances or laws that we might seek.

Community cats are defined as cats that live in a community with no known owner. These cats range from wild to domestic and virtually live on every street, in every town and city in this country.

The Committee's purpose is to develop not-lethal solutions to community cat issues. Lethal methods used for population control of community cats has never been effective nor is it sustainable as a practice.

The committee has done a great deal of research in other cities and communities that have developed effective responses to problems associated with the overpopulation of community cats. I would be happy to discuss these initiatives with you but the purpose of this letter is to ask that we have a discussion concerning a snag that we have run into.

To preface this allow me to provide a brief history of humans' relationship with cats. While the dog is considered man's best friend it is without any doubt that cats are singularly the most important animal to mankind that ever existed. This is because they are true carnivores and great hunters. It is suspected that they self-domesticated in the Fertile Crescent as man tried to transition from hunter/gatherers to an agrarian society. Through their active predation of vermin, cats allowed for the storage of grain, the very basis of an agriculture based society.

Man had domesticated a number of animals that were omnivores and might hunt and keep rat and mice populations down but they would also eat the grain. It is no wonder that as the cat became the partner of the earliest societies, whole religions grew up around them and often cats were considered gods and goddesses.

During a long period of European history the Roman Catholic Church held great control of the continent. In efforts to end the worship of pagan gods cats became vilified and were systematically rounded up and killed. People who owned cats were often vilified as well and routinely were killed as witches as a result. In the 1300s cats had been nearly eradicated in Europe and while the brown rat had lived in Europe for centuries, it was not until most cats were killed off that the bubonic plague, spread by the fleas on these rats, was able to devastate the continent, killing more than half the human population.

Today, community cats continue to silently help us in the control of rats and mice. Largely we are unaware of what they do and while they cannot kill all the rats or all the mice that live in a community, they certainly continue to keep the numbers down and they do it for free!

As we have developed plans to address controlling the number of community cats through proactive efforts, such as spaying and neutering, we asked that a representative of the County Health Department join us in planning. Our major reason for doing so was to address a very old sanitary code for Erie County that roughly states it to be a violation to feed cats on the ground. To engage the community in the non-lethal programs of control that we are developing we realize that there will be a need and a desire by the public to feed community cats. When we reached out to the Health Department to discuss this it was made pretty clear that there was no interest in a cooperative effort, and that their approach was going to continue to be giving notices of violation to individuals engaged in feeding community cats.

We certainly understand that food should not be left out, uneaten by cats. This could indeed cause further rodent problems. However, there is much room between these two ideas to provide a code that allows safe feeding of cats and provides for the health of these great hunters who help us live vermin free.

Our thought after meeting with resistance from the Health Department was to reach out to the legislature to see if we might together formulate rules that make sense for the feeding of community cats. Without this piece, any good or great plans, for reducing the number of community cats to the level that they are deemed helpful, not harmful, cannot happen.

I would very much appreciate the opportunity to discuss this with your committee. Thank you,

Barbara Carr

Executive Director SPCA