April 19th, 2022

Winnipeg City Council Executive Policy Committee
510 Main Street
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1B9

Dear Mayor and Councillors,

Re: Proposal to allow urban chicken keeping in Winnipeg

As animal welfare organizations and farmed animal sanctuaries operating in Manitoba and across Canada, we write to express our concerns regarding the recommendations put forward by Animal Services to establish an urban chicken-keeping pilot program in Winnipeg. The recommendations are lacking in key details, including specific requirements for coop size and design, lack of meaningful analysis of the benefits and risks associated with the program, and are inadequate to protect the welfare of chickens (e.g. no requirement for Animal Services to inspect coops and no restrictions on off-site slaughter) and prevent the spread of diseases such as avian flu that can have devastating impacts on wild and farmed birds, as well as humans.

Though there are many reasons to oppose this proposal, we write specifically from the perspective of animal sanctuaries and rescue groups. Some of our organizations have dealt with abandoned or surrendered chickens following the introduction of urban chicken keeping programs in other Canadian municipalities, while others will be forced to deal with such situations in Manitoba in the event that Council approves the recommended program.

Although chickens are intelligent, social, and inquisitive animals who make wonderful companions, allowing backyard chickens as a form of urban agriculture poses serious risks to the individual animals' welfare. We are asking Winnipeg City Council to reject this recommendation.

Chickens can live for more than 12 years, yet their egg production capacity often declines early on in life (often as early as after the 1st year). Adequately caring for chickens over the course of their lives also requires significant time, energy, space, and financial resources. When individuals keep chickens in urban settings for backyard egg production, a significant number of chickens are inevitably abandoned or escape,[1] or are surrendered to local shelters and sanctuaries.[2] This places a significant burden on law enforcement officials as well as local

[1] See, e.g. https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/calls-to-ottawa-bylaw-for-loose-chickens-more-than-double-from-pre-pandemic-levels-1.5637656.
[2] See, e.g. https://globalnews.ca/news/5244523/montreal-spca-abandoned-chickens/.

rescue groups and sanctuaries. Other unwanted chickens may be unnecessarily euthanized or sent to slaughter.

Because veterinary care for chickens can be extremely expensive – not to mention difficult to access in an urban setting – sick and injured chickens in particular are at risk of being sent to slaughter or else being abandoned or surrendered by those who cannot afford to pay vet bills or who would rather simply purchase a new and healthier chicken than spending hundreds of dollars on medical treatment for an unhealthy bird. Shelters and sanctuaries, many of which are already struggling to make ends meet, should not be left to bear the financial burden of treating sick and injured backyard chickens.

Though roosters would be prohibited in Winnipeg's pilot program, as they are in most backyard chicken programs, city dwellers in other jurisdictions have frequently learned that they unintentionally purchased a rooster.[3] Again, it is the animals themselves, as well as local rescue groups and sanctuaries called upon to take them in, that suffer as a result.

Consultation to-date has been in the form of a brief online survey with 2-3 multiple choice questions focused on the issue of urban chicken-keeping and no background information about the risks and benefits of such a program. We are also aware that one consultation meeting took place on this topic but only one animal rescue group (the Winnipeg Humane Society) was invited to participate. With respect, much more consultation and analysis is needed.

We ask you to vote against the recommendations to establish an urban chicken keeping program in Winnipeg. Alternatively, if you choose to consider such a program in Winnipeg, we urge you engage in meaningful consultation with local rescue groups and farmed animal sanctuaries, and undertake a thorough assessment of the public resources that would be required to monitor and inspect chicken coops throughout the city, as well as to respond to noise, animal welfare, odour, and wildlife complaints that will inevitably be made in relation to them. The proposed chicken-keeping program would require a substantial increase in funding for Animal Services, in addition to training for staff. We believe the risks to animals are too high, and that the public and charitable sector resources that will be taken up as a result of this proposal cannot be justified.

Kind regards,

Brittany Semeniuk
Animal Welfare Specialist
Winnipeg Humane Society

[3] See, e.g. https://www.spca.com/en/male-chicks-and-the-other-hidden-costs-of-the-backyard-chicken-trend/.

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Cc: Mayor Brian Bowman & Winnipeg City Council