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SENATE BILL NO. 279

Offered January 12, 2022

Prefiled January 11, 2022

A *BILL to amend and reenact §§ 3.2-6540.1 and 3.2-6569 of the Code of Virginia, relating to vicious dogs.*

Patron—DeSteph

Referred to Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That §§ 3.2-6540.1 and 3.2-6569 of the Code of Virginia is *are* amended and reenacted as follows:

§ 3.2-6540.1. Vicious dogs; penalties.

A. As used in this section:

"Serious injury" means an injury having a reasonable potential to cause death or any injury other than a sprain or strain, including serious disfigurement, serious impairment of health, or serious impairment of bodily function and requiring significant medical attention.

"Vicious dog" means a canine or canine crossbreed that has (i) killed a person, (ii) inflicted serious injury to a person, or (iii) continued to exhibit the behavior that resulted in a previous finding by a court or, on or before July 1, 2006, by an animal control officer as authorized by ordinance that it is a dangerous dog, provided that its owner has been given notice of that finding.

B. Any law-enforcement officer or animal control officer who (i) has reason to believe that a canine or canine crossbreed ~~within his jurisdiction~~ is a vicious dog ~~shall~~ and (ii) *is located in the jurisdiction where the vicious dog resides or in the jurisdiction where a vicious dog committed an act set forth in the definition may* apply to a magistrate serving the jurisdiction for the issuance of a summons requiring the owner or custodian, if known, to appear before a general district court at a specified time. The summons shall advise the owner of the nature of the proceeding and the matters at issue. If a law-enforcement officer successfully makes an application for the issuance of a summons, he shall contact the local animal control officer and inform him of the location of the dog and the relevant facts pertaining to his belief that the dog is vicious. The animal control officer shall confine the animal until such time as evidence shall be heard and a verdict rendered. *Unless good cause is determined by the court, the evidentiary hearing shall be held not more than 30 days from the issuance of the summons.* The court, through its contempt powers, may compel the owner, custodian, or harbinger of the animal to produce the animal. If, after hearing the evidence, the court finds that the animal is a vicious dog, the court shall order the animal euthanized in accordance with the provisions of § 3.2-6562. The court, upon finding the animal to be a vicious dog, may order the owner, custodian, or harbinger thereof to pay restitution for actual damages to any person injured by the animal or to the estate of any person killed by the animal. The court, in its discretion, may also order the owner to pay all reasonable expenses incurred in caring and providing for such vicious dog from the time the animal is taken into custody until such time as the animal is disposed of. The procedure for appeal and trial shall be the same as provided by law for misdemeanors, *except that unless good cause is determined by the court, an appeal shall be heard within 30 days.* Trial by jury shall be as provided in Article 4 (§ 19.2-260 et seq.) of Chapter 15 of Title 19.2. The Commonwealth shall be required to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt.

C. No canine or canine crossbreed shall be found to be a vicious dog solely because it is a particular breed, nor is the ownership of a particular breed of canine or canine crossbreed prohibited. No animal shall be found to be a vicious dog if the threat, injury, or damage was sustained by a person who was (i) committing, at the time, a crime upon the premises occupied by the animal's owner or custodian; (ii) committing, at the time, a willful trespass upon the premises occupied by the animal's owner or custodian; or (iii) provoking, tormenting, or physically abusing the animal, or can be shown to have repeatedly provoked, tormented, abused, or assaulted the animal at other times. No police dog that was engaged in the performance of its duties as such at the time of the acts complained of shall be found to be a vicious dog. No animal that, at the time of the acts complained of, was responding to pain or injury or was protecting itself, its kennel, its offspring, a person, or its owner's or custodian's property, shall be found to be a vicious dog.

D. Any owner or custodian of a canine or canine crossbreed or other animal whose willful act or omission in the care, control, or containment of a canine, canine crossbreed, or other animal is so gross, wanton, and culpable as to show a reckless disregard for human life and is the proximate cause of such

59 dog or other animal attacking and causing serious injury to any person is guilty of a Class 6 felony. The
60 provisions of this subsection shall not apply to any animal that, at the time of the acts complained of,
61 was responding to pain or injury or was protecting itself, its kennel, its offspring, a person, or its
62 owner's or custodian's property, or when the animal is a police dog that is engaged in the performance
63 of its duties at the time of the attack.

64 E. The governing body of any locality may enact an ordinance parallel to this statute regulating
65 vicious dogs. No locality may impose a felony penalty for violation of such ordinances.

66 **§ 3.2-6569. Seizure and impoundment of animals; notice and hearing; disposition of animal;**
67 **disposition of proceeds upon sale.**

68 A. Any humane investigator, law-enforcement officer or animal control officer may lawfully seize
69 and impound any animal that has been abandoned, has been cruelly treated, or is suffering from an
70 apparent violation of this chapter that has rendered the animal in such a condition as to constitute a
71 direct and immediate threat to its life, safety or health. The seizure or impoundment of an equine
72 resulting from a violation of clause (iv) of subsection A or clause (ii) of subsection B of § 3.2-6570 may
73 be undertaken only by the State Veterinarian or State Veterinarian's representative who has received
74 training in the examination and detection of sore horses as required by 9 C.F.R. Part 11.7.

75 B. Before seizing or impounding any agricultural animal, the humane investigator, law-enforcement
76 officer or animal control officer shall contact the State Veterinarian or State Veterinarian's representative,
77 who shall recommend to the person the most appropriate action for effecting the seizure and
78 impoundment. The humane investigator, law-enforcement officer or animal control officer shall notify
79 the owner of the agricultural animal and the local attorney for the Commonwealth of the
80 recommendation. The humane investigator, law-enforcement officer or animal control officer may
81 impound the agricultural animal on the land where the agricultural animal is located if:

82 1. The owner or tenant of the land where the agricultural animal is located gives written permission;

83 2. A general district court so orders; or

84 3. The owner or tenant of the land where the agricultural animal is located cannot be immediately
85 located, and it is in the best interest of the agricultural animal to be impounded on the land where it is
86 located until the written permission of the owner or tenant of the land can be obtained.

87 If there is a direct and immediate threat to an agricultural animal, the humane investigator,
88 law-enforcement officer or animal control officer may seize the animal, in which case the humane
89 investigator, law-enforcement officer or animal control officer shall file within five business days on a
90 form approved by the State Veterinarian a report on the condition of the animal at the time of the
91 seizure, the location of impoundment, and any other information required by the State Veterinarian.

92 C. Upon seizing or impounding an animal, the humane investigator, law-enforcement officer or
93 animal control officer shall petition the general district court in the city or county where the animal is
94 seized for a hearing. The hearing shall be not more than 10 business days from the date of the seizure
95 of the animal. The hearing shall be to determine whether the animal has been abandoned, has been
96 cruelly treated, or has not been provided adequate care.

97 D. The humane investigator, law-enforcement officer, or animal control officer shall cause to be
98 served upon the person with a right of property in the animal or the custodian of the animal notice of
99 the hearing. If such person or the custodian is known and residing within the jurisdiction wherein the
100 animal is seized, written notice shall be given at least five days prior to the hearing of the time and
101 place of the hearing. If such person or the custodian is known but residing out of the jurisdiction where
102 such animal is seized, written notice by any method or service of process as is provided by the Code of
103 Virginia shall be given. If such person or the custodian is not known, the humane investigator,
104 law-enforcement officer, or animal control officer shall cause to be published in a newspaper of general
105 circulation in the jurisdiction wherein such animal is seized notice of the hearing at least one time prior
106 to the hearing and shall further cause notice of the hearing to be posted at least five days prior to the
107 hearing at the place provided for public notices at the city hall or courthouse wherein such hearing shall
108 be held.

109 E. The procedure for appeal and trial shall be the same as provided by law for misdemeanors, *except*
110 *that unless good cause is determined by the court, an appeal shall be heard within 30 days.* Trial by
111 jury shall be as provided in Article 4 (§ 19.2-260 et seq.) of Chapter 15 of Title 19.2. The
112 Commonwealth shall be required to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt.

113 F. The humane investigator, law-enforcement officer, or animal control officer shall provide for such
114 animal until the court has concluded the hearing. Any locality may require the owner of any animal held
115 pursuant to this subsection for more than 30 days to post a bond in surety with the locality for the
116 amount of the cost of boarding the animal for a period of time set by ordinance, not to exceed nine
117 months.

118 In any locality that has not adopted such an ordinance, a court may order the owner of an animal
119 held pursuant to this subsection for more than 30 days to post a bond in surety with the locality for the
120 amount of the cost of boarding the animal for a period of time not to exceed nine months. The bond

shall not be forfeited if the owner is found to be not guilty of the violation.

If the court determines that the animal has been neither abandoned, cruelly treated, nor deprived of adequate care, the animal shall be returned to the owner. If the court determines that the animal has been (i) abandoned or cruelly treated, (ii) deprived of adequate care, as that term is defined in § 3.2-6500, or (iii) raised as a dog that has been, is, or is intended to be used in dogfighting in violation of § 3.2-6571, then the court shall order that the animal may be: (a) sold by a local governing body, if not a companion animal; (b) disposed of by a local governing body pursuant to subsection D of § 3.2-6546, whether such animal is a companion animal or an agricultural animal; or (c) delivered to the person with a right of property in the animal as provided in subsection G.

G. In no case shall the owner be allowed to purchase, adopt, or otherwise obtain the animal if the court determines that the animal has been abandoned, cruelly treated, or deprived of adequate care. The court shall direct that the animal be delivered to the person with a right of property in the animal, upon his request, if the court finds that the abandonment, cruel treatment, or deprivation of adequate care is not attributable to the actions or inactions of such person.

H. The court shall order the owner of any animal determined to have been abandoned, cruelly treated, or deprived of adequate care to pay all reasonable expenses incurred in caring and providing for such animal from the time the animal is seized until such time that the animal is disposed of in accordance with the provisions of this section, to the provider of such care.

I. The court may prohibit the possession or ownership of other companion animals by the owner of any companion animal found to have been abandoned, cruelly treated, or deprived of adequate care. In making a determination to prohibit the possession or ownership of companion animals, the court may take into consideration the owner's past record of convictions under this chapter or other laws prohibiting cruelty to animals or pertaining to the care or treatment of animals and the owner's mental and physical condition.

J. If the court finds that an agricultural animal has been abandoned or cruelly treated, the court may prohibit the possession or ownership of any other agricultural animal by the owner of the agricultural animal if the owner has exhibited a pattern of abandoning or cruelly treating agricultural animals as evidenced by previous convictions of violating § 3.2-6504 or 3.2-6570. In making a determination to prohibit the possession or ownership of agricultural animals, the court may take into consideration the owner's mental and physical condition.

K. Any person who is prohibited from owning or possessing animals pursuant to subsection I or J may petition the court to repeal the prohibition after two years have elapsed from the date of entry of the court's order. The court may, in its discretion, repeal the prohibition if the person can prove to the satisfaction of the court that the cause for the prohibition has ceased to exist.

L. When a sale occurs, the proceeds shall first be applied to the costs of the sale then next to the unreimbursed expenses for the care and provision of the animal, and the remaining proceeds, if any, shall be paid over to the owner of the animal. If the owner of the animal cannot be found, the proceeds remaining shall be paid into the Literary Fund.

M. Nothing in this section shall be construed to prohibit the humane destruction of a critically injured or ill animal for humane purposes by the impounding humane investigator, law-enforcement officer, animal control officer, or licensed veterinarian.