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Poultry and the Press

Urban Chickens on the National Stage

by Nicole Iroz-Elardo

After a 2010 Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) conference bus erupted into chatter from a tour guide's passing comment about a new ordinance allowing chickens into Minneapolis backyards, I wondered about the magnitude of the urban chicken movement. Legalizing urban chickens is, in fact, occurring more often. A Lexus-Nexus Power Search of the term 'chicken ordinance' does not even register a hit in 2000. Yet in 2010, 141 articles discussed potential changes to urban chicken ordinances. Such an explosion of national news coverage suggests urban chicken keeping reaches beyond Portland's borders.

What is driving this interest in urban chicken keeping? What is the media reporting as arguments for and against chickens in the urban context? With the help of my students, I reviewed over 200 newspaper articles from 2009 and 2010 to better understand the public discourse surrounding urban chicken ordinances.

National arguments for allowing backyard chickens mirror those of urban agriculture more broadly. Frequent themes include controlling the family food source (31 percent), sustainability (30 percent), self-reliance (25 percent) and frugality (22 percent). A resident of Beaverton, Oregon stated in *The Oregonian* (8/21/2010) that urban chicken keeping is "very much

about food security... I want people to get local food; I want it to be as close as possible."

Centerville, Utah resident Rebekah Homer Pierce proclaimed her support in a *Deseret Morning News* editorial (8/20/2010). Their family has "five hens and enjoyed designing and building our coop, learning about food production, breeds, and how to responsibly raise hens. We are happy with this decision to help our children learn responsibility and self-reliance." Caring for urban chickens teaches children important life lessons and values, and nearly one out of five articles mentioned the educational aspect of a backyard flock.

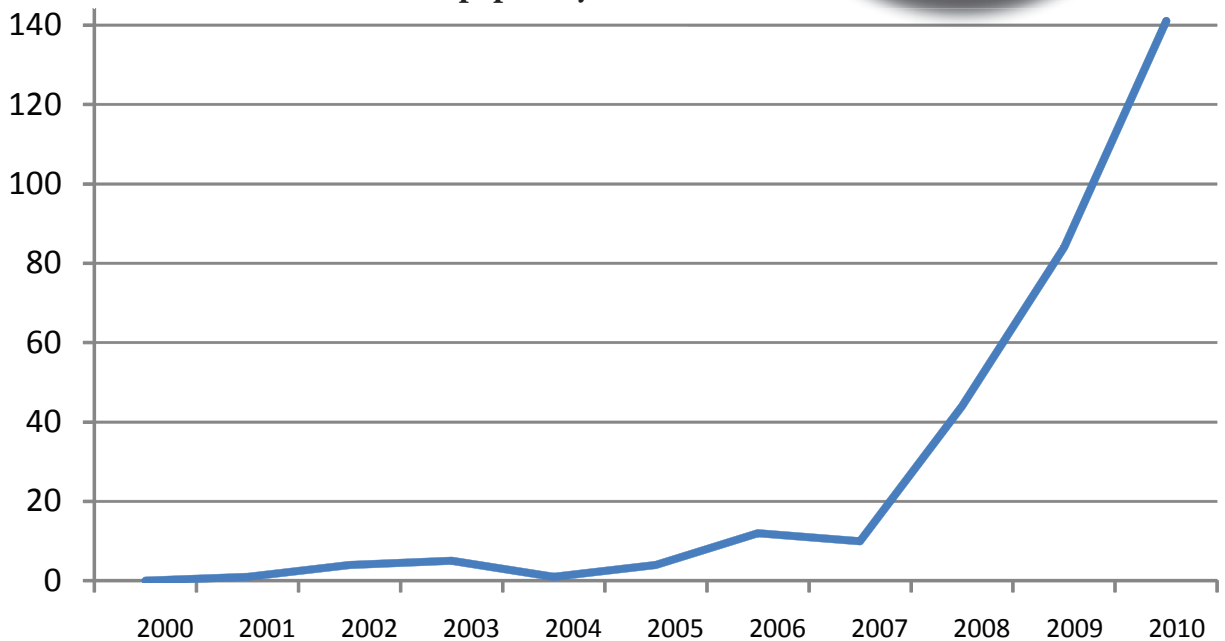
In many households, a chicken becomes an adored family pet. Indeed, fifteen percent of the newspaper articles extolled the virtues of chickens as pets; many noted that chickens are, on balance, better pets than cats or dogs. Karen Nordstrom, resident of Bloomington, Minnesota, was reported in the *Star Tribune* (9/29/2010) as saying "I doubt I would have a problem moving next door to someone with chickens; I would have a problem moving next door to someone with four barking dogs."

Not everyone appreciates chickens in an urban setting. Many articles (16 percent) reported general public opposition. *The Janesville Gazette* (5/4/2010) recorded Councilman Ron Webb of Edgerton,

Not everyone appreciates chickens in an urban setting...



Number of 'Hits' from Lexus-Nexus Power Search of US Newspapers by Year



Top Ten Reasons to Include or Exclude Chickens from Urban Backyards (2009-2010)

Pro-Chicken	Percent of Articles	Anti-Chicken	Percent of Articles
Control of Food	31%	Noise Nuisance	29%
Sustainability	30%	Smell Nuisance	27%
Self-Reliance	25%	General Public Health Issue	20%
Economic/Frugality	22%	Livestock/Farm Animal	20%
Educational	19%	General Citizen Opposition	16%
Healthy	16%	Compliance Workload/Budget	16%
Good Pets	15%	Rodents	13%
Better than Dog or Cat	13%	Increase of Animal Predators	12%
Not Noisy	8%	Decreased Property Values	10%
Not Smelly	7%	Wandering Chickens	9%



labeled chickens as livestock and emphasized their place on a farm. A resident of Flint, Michigan summed up opposition in the editorial section of the *Flint Journal* (8/10/2009): “For you who scream rights of the property owners, I hate to tell you the guy next door has the same rights as you. He has the right to not put up with [chickens]. You want to be a chicken farmer, buy a farm!”

Other articles were more specific about reasons why chickens might create “monumental livability issues” in urban areas. Citizens worried about falling property values (ten percent), chickens becoming feral and wandering the neighborhood (nine percent), and fowl “scratching up somebody’s flower bed.” A few articles (six percent), including

one in the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* (10/30/2010), suggested that inviting chickens into the city “could open the door for chicken abuse and neglect.” Indeed, a representative of the Animal Humane Society in Minneapolis reported to the *Star Tribune* (8/21/2010) that one shelter had taken in 89 chickens in 2009; chickens came from classroom hatching projects of “back-yard situations where it was too much work or people lost interest.”

Chickens in dense neighborhoods do present potential problems including noise (29 percent), smell (27 percent), and general health concerns (20 percent). Those advocating for chickens are aware of these issues and often preemptively state noise (8 percent) and smell (7 percent) should not be an issue if roosters are banned and hens are managed appropriately. Less prevalent, but just as problematic, is the potential increase of disease vectors: rodents (13 percent), other urban predators such as raccoons (12 percent), and chicken carcasses (3 percent). It is probably safe to dispose of dead chickens just as you would your Thanksgiving turkey carcass. However city planners and public health departments will need to continue to address the other nuisance and health concerns through carefully crafted ordinances as the urban animal husbandry movement grows.

Nicole Iroḡ-Elardo is a PhD Candidate in Urban Studies & Planning at Portland State University where her teaching and research investigates the intersection of public health and urban governance. Many thanks to the Winter 2011 Healthy Communities students for their contributions.