

EnviroHorse Public Issue Paper: Fears and Facts

The Sky is Falling! The Sky is Falling! Or How to Deal with Foolish Fears about Horses

By Cyla Allison, Ph.D.

Your local township, county or town legislature or zoning board publishes an agenda with a proposal to limit horse use and horse keeping because they fear that equines spread disease.

After you finish sputtering with disbelief and anger, what do you do to counter their ignorant assertions and thoughtlessness? You know that you and your children and friends have lived around horses all your lives without becoming ill from disease, but the legislators do not.

It is important that you become knowledgeable about the process this particular legislative body uses; learn about deadlines for submission of papers and hearings, how decisions are made and how to access the system. Julie I. Fershtman's article in the Fall issue of ECLR The Resource is a basic and accurate summary.

Our country has become increasingly anxious in the last year or so. War, terrorist attacks, fears of Anthrax, small pox and Tularemia are on the minds of Americans. In an attempt to sooth ourselves, we try to reduce our risk; therefore, some of us are afraid to fly, cross bridges or have our children go for a hike in the woods from of fear of some catastrophic event.

The best antidote to fear is knowledge. You know that you feel safe living around horses; you need to help the lawmaker and community feel just as safe.

Read the proposed document carefully; read between the lines if you must. Try to determine which fears are foremost and spend your efforts dispelling misperceptions.

You may need to separate horses from other mentioned animals such as goats or chickens.

If you were unable to head off the legislative attack before it got to a public hearing, you need careful preparation to attend the meeting.

It is wise to have a well-spoken constituent call a representative before the meeting to hear what the legislator considers the "real problem". This call is in reality a "fishing expedition;" knowledge is power-the more you know about the issues, the better you can address them. In other words, keep in mind that there are public reasons (frequently phony) and private reasons. Is this a political payback for lack of support by a prominent horseperson at the last election, somebody's personal neighborhood feud, a

developer's ploy to avoid easements? Is it a move by another user group to play "all mine" and "you can't have any?"

If possible, have different people call all the board members or legislators involved in the panel. If it is a zoning hearing, the calls may need to be made to the legislator involved and not the zoning personnel. Letters are effective. For every letter an elected official receives, he figures 10 other people feel the same way. Petitions are helpful, but not nearly as effective as letters. Handwritten letters are fine.

Most legislative meetings have a protocol for signing in, identifying you, the speaker, and the subject of your talk. Use your business card. If you don't have an appropriate card, make one with your horse affiliation on it. If you own a business, even not horse related, that is a plus as you are seen as a more powerful person who affects non-horse people in the community.

There are usually rules about how long a person in the audience can speak. Be prepared to speak briefly, maybe as little as three minutes. Always begin by thanking the panel for an opportunity to express your point of view. Identify your qualifications to speak.

Frequently the meetings are held at awkward times—a 2 pm on a Tuesday afternoon when most people have to be at work. Be alert.

I have been asked to speak in different townships. Some unfriendly chairmen exclude talks from those who are not residents. You can have a resident read your comments or have a written and even notarized letter that asks you to speak for a resident who can't make the meeting or has laryngitis.

Numbers count. Have a phone chain in place. Call all members, former members, tack storeowners, barn owners. Ask them to come down and register to speak. They don't have to speak when their time comes; they can simply stand up and say, "I agree with the comments of . . ." or "I would like to add just one thing to the comments of . . ." Many people are afraid to speak in public. Simply having a number of silent interested polite horsepeople at a hearing is impressive.

Have your comments typed attractively, on an identifying letterhead with contact information about you and your organization. Place the comments in one of those folders with pockets and a place for your business card. Include other information in it and give a copy to the person taking notes as well as one for each member of the board (usually 5, or 7 or 9 people). Have copies of your talk and business cards ready to hand out to the press.

In the folder, for example, you might also include a typical newsletter, a flyer about a trail ride, some information about a fund raising benefit by a local equestrian group, something about a trail clean up, some economic impact information. Emphasize that horse activities are family activities for ordinary people. Pictures of children and horses are a positive PR move. Be professional.

Remember there is a prejudice that horse people are either ruffians or rich people with their noses in the air. There is jealousy and you don't want to feed it. You want to look like and behave like the neighbor we all want to have.

And you are.

Let me review some of the most likely arguments:

1) FEAR: Horses spread West Nile disease. FACT: Horses, just like humans, are dead end hosts. They can get the disease but they cannot spread it. Mosquitoes spread West Nile; infected birds spread the disease from region to region. Refer them to the Centers for Disease Control web site.

2) FEAR: Horses spread Rabies. FACT: Horses can be and should be inoculated against Rabies. Only 5 or 6 species can be inoculated against rabies-humans, dogs, cats, ferrets, cattle and horses. Check your state and county statistics through the web site for Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Your local health department may also have rabies statistics. Horses are not a significant rabies vector. Bats, raccoons and other wild animals spread rabies; livestock such as cattle and sheep can be inoculated, but rarely are as the expense would be prohibitive. Some animals are inoculated "off-label" which means that the veterinarians think that the inoculation works, but that the vaccination has not been "approved." The point to make is that horses do not spread rabies; for an urban environment where horses come in contact with the public, it would be reasonable to require vaccination.

3) FEAR: Horses bring e coli FACT: Horse manure is clean; it spreads no disease. Human excrement, dog poop and cat feces are infinitely dirtier. Barn workers, our children, veterinarians and riders do not come down with e coli unless they go to a restaurant with bad food.

Improperly kept horse facilities can pollute, no doubt. Overflowing trash, roadside runoff, the fertilizers and pesticides we put on our lawns and cigarette smoke also pollute. However, we don't ban trash, roads, fertilizers or cigarettes, we regulate them. Horse people do not want to keep their horses in an unpleasant atmosphere because that is not good for horses or neighbors. To set requirements for proper composting bins, placement of dumpsters or periodic removal of manure from the facility is reasonable. Much of Long Island's horse manure is gleefully harvested for vineyards and nurseries.

4) FEAR: Horses bring flies. FACT: Any outdoor activity brings flies. Visit your local campground, park and picnic area for proof. Stables work hard at controlling the fly population; researches have found products that horses eat to kill fly larvae; they can use organic means such as a certain type of non stinging wasp can be released around barns to keep the fly population low; in addition, the regime of every barn includes daily

individual fly control. Compare such efforts to the regime for fly control waged at your local picnic area, fishing site, dog or cat kennel.

5) FEAR: Rats. FACT: The greatest attraction for rodents is the backyard bird feeder. Better the legislators ban bird feeders if they really want to make a dent in the rodent population. Horse people do not like rodents either. Every barn has organic rat catchers-cats. Every barn keeps its food supplies as inaccessible as possible for two reasons: a horse that gets into food and eats too much can die and, secondly, unwanted rodents who get into the food pollute it.

6) FEAR: Smell. FACT: Spreading fertilizer on crops smells; perhaps we should ban that. Elementary Schools at the end of the day smell; gasoline pumps smell; people can absolutely stink; buses and diesel engines smell; freshly stacked firewood smells, garlic and onions smell. Which of these "smells" is dangerous to our health? Are we going to legislate preference? I like the smell of a barn and leather. I hate the smell of new plastic, heavy perfume and ammonia. Nobody is advocating we tolerate a stinky barn; we are saying that nature has natural smells. A dry barn does smell like horses inside. I love that smell. Outside, it does not have an odor at all.

7) FEAR: Horses are a nuisance. FACT: Horses make good neighbors. They don't have late night parties, their teen-age children don't roar up and down the street with loud mufflers or motorcycles and they don't bark when their owners aren't home. People with horses are taking care of them; they and their children have little time to loiter, to do drugs, to vandalize. Horses do not require us to pay increased taxes to educate them, register them to vote or to subsidize their medical care. They do not require air conditioning or oil heat.

8) FEAR: Horses decrease property values. FACT: Horses increase the property values across neighborhoods. They are a quality of life issue that holds back the flood of urbanites who want to pave and edge their entire property; plant exotic and non native species in their overly landscaped yards and run their chlorine fed pool pumps all day long. Dare anyone to watch a day of TV commercials or look through a national magazine without seeing horses linked to a healthy and meaningful life.

9) FEAR: Horses are dangerous. FACT: Horses are vegetarians. Horses do not attack anything, as they themselves are the prey animals. Dogs can attack, cats can attack, humans can attack, raccoons can attack, and parrots can attack. Horses run away from danger.

Once you begin to think and present logically by providing scientific information to calm unwarranted fears, you make it easier for the administrator or public official to make a judgment in your favor. You want to present yourself and your group as fellow concerned citizens (who vote!) who understand the difficulty of making informed judgments.

If the decisions don't go your way in one hearing, be sure to follow up by meeting with

the individual politicians and administrators. Rules and regulations are rarely written in stone and persistence can make considerable headway. Also look at state law that might supercede a local legislation. Your local board of town leaders may not know that the regulations they are proposing are actually subsumed under a state or federal law on the books.

Each of us has to be aware and willing to make the effort to speak up to conserve a historic and healthy way of life.

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