



February 24, 2026 City Council Meeting

Title

Proposed Amendments to Ordinance Section 15-2-24- Fowl, Chickens and Other Domestic Birds – Adam Fletcher, Director of Community Development

Summary

The proposed changes to Ordinance Section 15-2-24 – Fowl, Chickens and Other Domestic Birds is to clarify and reflect the current administrative process for its enforcement. The changes define departmental roles, while also specifying permitted dwelling types, pen requirements, and allowed pen placement within yards. Staff seeks City Council’s approval to adopt these updates to provide clearer guidance for residents and ensure consistent enforcement.

Recommendation

Option 1. Adopt the proposed changes to Ordinance Section 15-2-24- Fowl, Chickens and Other Domestic Birds as presented.

Fiscal Impact

There is no anticipated fiscal impact associated with this proposed ordinance amendment.

Context & Analysis

The City of Harrisonburg regulates the keeping of chickens within city limits through Ordinance Section 15-2-24 Fowl, Chickens and Other Domestic Birds. The existing ordinance establishes requirements for pen placement, setbacks, permitting, and enforcement, but staff have identified areas where clarification and administrative updates are necessary for consistent enforcement and expectations.

The proposed updates are summarized below:

1. Clarify which dwelling types are eligible for a chicken permit. Chickens would be allowed on residentially used properties containing single-family detached dwellings or manufactured homes that are attached to a permanent foundation, titled as real estate, and limited to one dwelling per lot. Where multiple single-family detached dwellings exist on the same parcel, the property as a whole would be limited to one chicken permit. These

clarifications are intended to resolve ambiguity about eligible dwelling types and prevent potential conflicts on properties with multiple residences.

2. Provide definitions for “pen” and “covered” to establish consistent construction and maintenance expectations for accepted enclosures.
3. Clarify that setback requirements do not apply to internal property lines when contiguous parcels are under the same ownership, provided all other requirements are met.
4. Update the administrative process for inspections and permitting so that the Department of Community Development, following inspection and approval by the Police Department’s Animal Care and Control Unit, would issue the annual permit.
5. Establish flexibility in how chicken permits are displayed or made available. This provision allows permit holders to either post the permit on the pen or keep it accessible to show upon request by animal control.
6. Remove a section referring to zoning nonconformities or “grandfathering.”
7. Change enforcement provisions to reduce violations of this section from a Class 3 misdemeanor to a Class 4 misdemeanor. This adjustment was recommended by the Animal Care and Control Unit, which determined the existing penalty was too severe given the nature of the violation. To the best of our knowledge, at the time of this report, no residents have been charged with a Class 3 misdemeanor for violating the provisions of this ordinance.

These changes collectively aim to ensure consistency, reduce ambiguity, and clearly define departmental roles in administering the ordinance. The proposed updates also better reflect current practice while continuing to provide the originally intended safeguards for animal welfare, neighborhood compatibility, and public health.

Copies of the drafted changes were shared with the current Animal Control Officers, Geoffrey Bechtel and Joseph VanOrden, as well as the President of the Virginia Poultry Federation, Hobe Bauhan. No concerns were raised by any party regarding the proposed changes.

Options

1. Adopt the proposed changes to Ordinance Section 15-2-24- Fowl, Chickens and Other Domestic Birds as presented.
2. Provide alternate direction.

Attachments

1. Current Ordinance Reflecting Recommended Amendments