

As Palm Coast Looks to Rewrite Feral Cat Rules, Advocates Plead For More Accommodation

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FlaglerLive

October 31, 2018



Get me rewrite. (Koji Ishi)

If you think herding cats is difficult, try defining them or controlling them when they're not housebound: Are they feral cats? Homeless cats? Community cats? Should they be fed? Relocated? Killed? Enclosed?

Palm Coast has had its challenges with feral cats for years until it became a so-called TNR city in 2016—the acronym for the method that enables the city, in association with the Flagler Humane Society, to trap feral cats, spay and neuter them, then release them back into their previous environment. It's a humane alternative to killing them (or euthanizing them, as the method is often euphemized), with the significant advantage of ending reproductive lines and thus potentially reducing the feral cat population rather than letting it multiply.

But the city's TNR policy is general and at times vague enough to create further conflict. Caretakers of "community cats," as feral cats advocates prefer to refer to the free-roaming animals, have been struggling with the confusion. A caretaker was recently fined by the city,

triggering a flood of emails to council members and a renewed push to clarify the city's ordinance and compel the city to take the community-cat approach more seriously.

"I am one of the residents that was fined by the city," Danielle Miller said, "and now because I have cared for them I have been named their Owner. My fine was originally \$150. Mrs. Grossman has decided that because they are free roaming cats I will now have to pay \$75 for a nuisance violation. This honestly makes no sense. How am I suppose to confine Free Roaming cats? This is definitely an issue that needs to be talked about." Barbara Grossman is the city's code enforcement manager.

Cat advocates were never convinced in 2016 that then-City Manager Jim Landon was a TNR enthusiast. They saw the city administration's move in that direction as half-hearted.

That may be changing. The city is preparing to redraft its entire animal control ordinance. "This ordinance is not just TNR, it's aggressive dogs, it's tethering and it's animal cruelty," Grossman said. On Tuesday, Grossman and the council focused on cats during a lengthy discussion on what the future ordinance should read like. A draft is expected at a November 27 workshop, with a council vote on the ordinance's first reading the following week.

Advocates of TNR and new ways of referring to feral cats attended Tuesday's workshops, as did opponents of TNR, largely represented by members of the Audubon Society, who see feral cats as predators on birds and other wildlife.

Elizabeth Robinson, whose Community Cats organization helped lead the way to Palm Coast becoming a TNR city two years ago, briefed the council on the issue's history—and the resistance to TNR before 2016—and on the organization's goals for the coming rewrite.

"Because there was no comprehensive approach taken in 2016 about how these cats are going to be regarded in our community when they do come back to live among us," Robinson said, "there were no rules, nothing in the ordinance that governs that. We started to have a lot of incidents where people complained, cats were rounded up, removed, people were cited or fined, they felt they were harassed by animal control. It got ugly between neighbors and there really didn't seem to be a program to address this. They felt that they had done the right and responsible thing and humane thing for these animals and for their community. You had as a result a lot of negative things played out. So we really need to now make it comprehensive—not just a TNR program but a community cat program. How are these cats going to live in our community and how are we going to deal with conflicts."

"Complainants" should not "feel like they are somehow entitled to a cat-free world," an advocate of community cats says.

Robinson is looking for a definition of community cats that differentiates them from owned animals and recognizes them as free-roaming. She is urging the city not to go to great efforts to relocate or contain cats in “what amounts to backyard kennels,” though that approach is gaining currency among opponents of free-roaming cats. There’s also a mindset issue. “These animals are going to be here, they’re not going to disappear tomorrow,” Robinson said, noting that “complainants” should not “feel like they are somehow entitled to a cat-free world. That’s not going to be realistic, at least in the short run.”

To the Audubon Society’s Dave Smith, however, feral cats are “a huge issue” for the country and the rest of the world, saying native wildlife developed locally without house cats. He proposed an “indoor-cats program,” such as with enclosures or contained areas for cats, including domesticated cats that also roam about. “It’s not just feral cats, it’s free-roaming cats. Address them both,” he said.

For now, cats are left alone unless they’re a nuisance. Animal control doesn’t patrol streets looking for problem cats, but it does respond to residents’ complaints, investigates, meets with both those who complain and those who care for the cats, tries some education for both sides, and sets traps if necessary. “It takes partners to find that balance, neighbors do have the right to enjoy their property without their things being torn up,” Interim City Manager Beau Falgout said. “So we’re often asked to be put in a position between the community cats and the neighbors.”

Those who are bothered by community cats can use simple strategies, from spraying cat-repelling scents to using motion-activated water repellents.

Since 2016, just 128 cats have been taken to the humane society for neutering. The number of feral cats in the city is not clear. The city has also relocated some colonies. In 2017 there was a colony of in Linear Park, between the two directions of Palm Coast Parkway. The city, the Humane Society and Community Cats moved them outside the park to an empty lot, with a feeding station Community Cats built for them. The 15 to 20 cats that once populated that colony are now down to seven. “We haven’t had one complaint” since the cats were moved, Grossman said. “I think it works.” Same story at a Publix and Dollar Tree, where feeding schedules and hygiene rules are respected.

“Euthanasia is not something that we want,” Grossman said: the city prefers to work with groups like Community Cats to divert animals from that path. The Humane Society does not euthanize cats other than those that are brought in with untreatable injuries or debilitating diseases. But there are times when cats are relocated to places that are not necessarily to the cats’ advantage, as a strategy to address complaints—or when residents like Miller who become targets of the city’s code enforcement and of neighbors’ passive vigilantism.

“I am a resident who took it upon myself to stop the breeding in my neighborhood and I have been punished for it,” Miller said. “I’m thankful they cut the fine in half but again it just makes no sense. Free Roaming means free roaming, the cats don’t deserve to be killed or moved to

meet a certain death. I also need to mention my 'Colony' here consists of four cats. My neighbors have video surveillance of my house now, and pointed toward my house. I live like a prisoner."

There's no question that the council is supportive of community-cat advocates—TNR was championed by council member Heidi Shipley—but with nuances.

"I think we're kidding ourselves if we think we can educate people that hate cats," council member Bob Cuff said. More education is needed, but he doubts it will dissuade diehard cat-haters. "I'm anxious to see what chances we can make in our ordinances to try to make life better for the semi-owned cats, if you want to put it that way." He suggested that "moving toward" encouraging enclosed areas for cats, in large backyards, could be a way.

Council member Vincent Lyon also supports TNR, but he put the matter of community cats bluntly: "They are an invasive species, they do create damage to the environment, and feeding them doesn't stop them from killing, doesn't reduce the number they kill," he said, "so the only thing we can do is that there are fewer [cats], because a cat can have four litters in a year and can have six cats survive from that so the growth can be huge. TNR is a way of filling that niche in the environment with a community that does not grow" and keeps from overpopulating. He wants representatives from groups like the Audubon Society at the table as the city works on the ordinance re-write, saying their perspective should very much be part of the final result.

That perspective is sometimes tainted by inaccuracies, however. When the Audubon Society's Priscilla Reed addressed the council, she outlined a series organizations, including the American Bird Conservancy and the St. Johns Parks and Recreation department, that according to her take positions opposing TNR, which she described as "the wrong solution to a tragic problem."

She included the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in her list. "The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's policy, under recommended strategies, oppose creation and support elimination of TNR colonies and similar managed cat colonies wherever they potentially and significantly impact local wildlife population," Reed said. But that's not accurate. She was repeating a myth so prevalent that FWC explicitly addresses it.

"At its May 30, 2003 meeting at Kissimmee, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission passed a policy regarding feral and free-ranging cats," the commission reports [on its website](#). "It is apparent from recent articles and letters in the media, as well as from feedback directly to the Commission from the public, that some people have a serious misunderstanding about that policy. What the Commission approved May 30 was just that – a policy – 'to protect native wildlife from predation, disease and other impacts presented by feral and free-ranging cats.' This policy does not call for the FWC to kill cats, nor does it outlaw the practice of Trap-Neuter-Release."

Rather, the commission favors awareness campaigns—and respect for local ordinances. The policy is [outlined here](#).