

## Questions and Answers on Last Week's Dog Hearing

The Board of Selectmen has been deluged with questions about the hearing held last week on the English Bull Mastiff, Gabriella. Here are some of the most common questions.

*What are the facts, as established at the hearing?*

The Ullmans, owners of two dogs, one of whom is the dog in question, frequently bring them to their store in Hingham Square. In June of 2008, Mrs. Ullman stepped out of her store, leaving the dogs inside. Whether or not there was a sign on the door indicating that the owner was out, the door was unlocked. A customer entered the store and was set upon by the dogs, who were defending their territory in the owner's absence. Gabriella bit the customer, and the victim required medical attention.

After that incident, the Hingham Police repeatedly asked Mrs. Ullman to leave the dogs at home, and this request was repeatedly ignored. Eventually, the police indicated that she would be charged with disorderly conduct if she brought the dogs to the store. Mrs. Ullman did bring the dogs in, and was so charged. The case is pending.

This July, the previous incident was repeated exactly. Mrs. Ullman stepped out of the store, and another customer entered the store and was bitten. She also required medical attention.

*Why doesn't the Board tell the owners to keep the dogs at home?*

The Ullmans have already been directed by the police more than once to leave the dogs at home, and they did not comply. They have had multiple opportunities to demonstrate that they can handle this dog properly, and they have not done so.

*Why doesn't the Board require some other kind of rules for the dogs?*

There is no reason to think the owners would observe any requirements we set, because they have already ignored them.

*What if the owners say they will observe the rules, now?*

It was established in our hearing that Mrs. Ullman told the first victim that the dog would never be in the store again. In addition, she told the second victim that the dog had never bitten anyone before. The Board is not willing to rely on the assertions of the owners.

*Isn't this the fault of the owners, not the dog?*

Yes, absolutely.

*Why are you punishing the dog and not the owners?*

Nothing the Board of Selectmen does in this case is for punishment. Our only charge is to protect public safety. Anything we do is for that purpose only.

*Why did you order the dog to be euthanized? Why can't it be adopted by more responsible owners?*

The Board concluded that the current owners have forfeited their right to own this dog due to their demonstrated lack of concern for public safety.

Where will the dog go? A shelter would be the only option, because the Town can't be responsible for placing the dog in a private home. No-kill animal shelters in general do not accept dogs with a history of biting, because they can't place these dogs in homes.

Here's what the regional coordinator for Friends of Rescued Mastiffs, Inc., had to say: "I am unaware of any Rescue or shelter that would take Gabriella as she is a serious liability, and putting her into some family's home would be very irresponsible.... Not every dog can, or should, be saved and humane euthanasia is the only sound choice.... The Town is doing the right thing."

Without a place for the dog to go, the Board is out of options. Many people have told us they are sure that someone would take this dog. No one has told us who that someone is.

Mr. Ullman is appealing the decision to the courts, and meanwhile he is searching for a shelter that would take the dog. He will have his opportunity to show the judge that he has found an acceptable place for the dog which is consistent with public safety. If he does that, it seems very likely a judge would agree. If he had brought such information to our hearing, our answer might have been different as well.

We would be as delighted as everyone else if the dog found a safe place to be.

*Aren't you overreacting to two biting incidents?*

Not at all. The picture of one of the bites which was introduced at our hearing was frightening. Both of the bites were at the level of a child's head. If one of the customers had opened the door to let a small child go through first, this could have been tragic. English Bull Mastiffs weigh up to 140 pounds, and are perfectly capable of killing a child.

If the owners had simply obeyed the police directives, Gabriella would be living at home now. It's very painful to us that a dog pays the price for the irresponsibility of the owners. Our responsibility for public safety leaves us no alternative.