

A Tale of Two Cities

How to Advocate For Bees in an Urban Setting

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"Fighting City Hall" drawing by Kelle DeForest August, 2013

Fighting City Hall may be a daunting task for a beekeeper, especially an urban beekeeper who wants to legalize beekeeping within city limits. I recently worked with two cities in Lane County, Oregon and I found what works and what does not. Eugene, Oregon, now allows 3 hives per property under 20,000 square feet and 4 hives/property 20,000 square feet and over. That was our victory. The other municipality, Junction City, Oregon, threw out a well written ordinance drafted by their planning commission to allow beehives and poultry. However, that city council disapproved of ducks and chickens, and because beehives were tied into that ordinance all went down together. (By the way, I personally love ducks and chickens, but my

battle was to allow beekeeping.) We lost with Junction City, Oregon but learned a great deal in the process.

A little background on the process: Every municipality has its own procedure, but Eugene and Junction City are similar. Each of these cities requires petitioning their planning division to allow or to increase the number beehives in the city limits. The planning division then schedules a hearing where speakers may advocate for or against beehives. After that the planning division draws up a proposal for a city ordinance to be presented to the city council. The city council schedules a hearing. This means I spoke in front of four groups, two per city. I found that every group I spoke to was enraptured with the education about bees and beekeeping. In all cases, I was given three minutes to speak. When the timer went off, the hook went out! The Junction City planning commission asked me to remain and answer questions about bees. When the Junction City Council turned down the proposed ordinance, after much discussion about chickens and ducks, one of the city councilors told me that she had been totally converted to bees; the education made her a 'believer'. Of course, this did not eradicate the fact that Junction City, Oregon beehives would go down with the chickens and ducks, but I took that as a lesson to be shared. *Educate, educate, educate.*

My advice to any urban beekeeper advocating for bees in their municipality is:

- 1) Learn the process to create or revise an ordinance in your particular city. Inform other beekeepers and beekeeping clubs to write letters to advocate for hives in the city. Include letters from neighbors of beekeepers who appreciate honey bees. Round up volunteers to advocate in front of municipal organizations. Your talk may be very similar to your letter.
- 2) Make beekeeping a separate issue; i.e. don't include it in drafts of other urban farm ordinances. Beekeeping would have won hands down in Junction City, OR, if it hadn't been tied to allowing poultry. The poultry folks failed to draft good arguments and beekeeping went down with it.

3) Educate! Don't be defensive. This may be tricky but once you have the floor in front of the Planning Division and then the City Council, it is your job to present a winning case. If you state that you and your family want an urban farm and want local honey because it's 100 percent real raw honey and "slow food" and "green", you may not convince many city officials to allow beehives, even though your personal causes may be noble. However, if you were to address the importance of bees in our food chain, dispel myths about swarms and stings, not only will the group listen attentively, they will become fascinated. If you are advocating for a greater number of hives per property, let the group know that good hive management means flexibility of the number of hives: in the spring splitting hives to discourage swarming, combining hives that are weak, in the winter having to carry over nucs to requeen hives in the spring. This education is very convincing to non-beekeepers.

One mistake the chicken and duck group made in Junction City was to state that it was important for them to eat the food they produce and/or they could no longer afford to buy free range chicken eggs. It may be a reason to raise back yard poultry, but there is no real education presented. They could state that chickens do not emanate odors to other properties if they are kept in a pen so many yards away from neighbors, nor do they create a problem of manure. They could state that barking dogs are much noisier than 6 hens. They could include neighbors to testify. In other words, they could present convincing educational facts.

The following is the testimony I gave to both planning commissions and city councils. This testimony may be revised for any municipality.

"Commissioners/Council Members,

I am an urban beekeeper and live in the west Eugene neighborhood. My neighbors are very supportive of the beekeepers in the neighborhood because they recognize the value of honey bees. Also, they appreciate the pollination of their fruit trees and vegetable gardens.

Importance of Urban Beekeeping

- *There are very few feral honey bees left. With the commercial honey bees dying off from pesticides and diseases, urban beekeepers help preserve their existence.*

Honey bees pollinate the neighborhood fruit trees and vegetable gardens. They also produce honey and beeswax.

Some Factoids

- *Look at your plants! You already have honey bees, bumble bees, other native bees on many of your flowers. These honey bees typically fly 2 miles and more from their hives to forage for nectar and pollen and may easily come from outside the city limits.*

- *Over 1/3 of the food we eat could not exist without the pollination of honeybees*

- *Hives are kept at both the Oregon Governor's estate in Salem and the White House in Washington, D.C. Hives are allowed in New York City. Portland, OR allows any number of hives with as long as the beekeeper gets signatures from neighbors and registers the hives.*

Stings

- *Honey bees are not aggressive insects. They sting only when people come too close to their hives...and probably won't even sting then. Foragers don't*

want to do anything except forage. They will sting if you step on them barefoot.

It's beekeepers who typically get stung by honey bees.

- *YELLOW JACKETS ARE NOT BEES! Honeybees are often confused with aggressive yellow-jackets, wasps and bald-faced hornets. People who are stung in the summer and fall are stung by hornets, especially yellow jackets. One of the biggest enemies of honeybees is yellow-jackets who kill them, eat them, rob their hives of honey, and eat their brood.*

Swarms

- *You already experience swarms of honey bees from hives 3 miles away from town. Urban beekeepers are assets to the fire and police department because they are able to collect these swarms for free.*
- *A swarm of honey bees is very GENTLE. The bees have a hard time getting into their sting position because they are full of honey.*
- *There is a swarm list on the Lane County Beekeeper site (www.lcbaor.org), as well as the Oregon State Beekeeper site and beekeepers are invited to have their names placed there.*

Number of Hives per Property

In good practice, there shouldn't be a set number of hives per property, but a maximum of 5 is very reasonable. In the spring you may need to divide a strong hive to minimize swarming. When you divide a hive you actually start a smaller hive and the original hive is relieved of brood congestion, which discourages swarming. It is good practice to carry two hives and two half-hives (called "nucs") through the winter. This way, if a hive is lost, it can replace it by building

up the nuc in the spring. If a hive in the spring is too strong, the beekeeper can add their bees to nucs to build it up into a regular hive, then move the new hive off the property if the number of hives exceeds the limit. If a hive loses its queen the beekeeper can combine a nuc (which has a queen) with the queenless hive.

Resources for Beekeepers

- *Beekeepers in Lane County can be continually educated about proper year round maintenance of their hives to promote good hive health, disease control and swarm control. Lane County Beekeepers Association and the Oregon Master Beekeepers program are good sources of education, as well as classes offered at Oregon State University and a one-day bee school offered by LCBA.”*

Don't despair if you lose; there are several ways to proceed. First, determine what your mistakes were. You may want to rephrase your request for your city to allow beehives and go back to first process, in my case the planning division. You may want the press to get involved. You may want to research how to place 'allowing beekeeping' on a city ballot, which may involve petitioning neighborhoods for signatures. BE PATIENT AND PERSIST.

Good Luck!