



TIPS FOR WRITING OR TALKING ABOUT BSL

Aurora, Colorado City Councilmember Bob Fitzgerald explained the need for a citywide pit bull ban thus: "We don't want 'those people' here." Owners of certain breeds of dogs - especially pit bulls and Rottweilers - suffer from strong stereotyping that can make it difficult for them to be heard or treated seriously, especially when it comes to talking about BSL. Government representatives typically believe that owners of certain breeds are drug dealers, criminals, young punks, poverty-stricken, or otherwise marginalized and "dangerous". And many owners of these particular breeds are seen as anti-social, uncaring, thuggish, or violent.

No scientific studies have been done to determine whether the stereotype is in fact the norm, and as is often the case, I suspect the stereotype is pretty far off. (Some informal polls indicate that most pit bulls are in fact owned by middle-age white females of average socio-economic status.) However, when talking with your representatives about BSL, you must be aware of not only how you are portraying yourself, but also how the representatives already see you. If you are already shoved into the negative category of "anti-social, drug dealing pit bull owner", your representatives are going to discount or abuse every single thing you say. You can make the situation worse through your own words and behavior, so it's important to tread carefully. Here are some tips regarding how to properly portray yourself and communicate for best results.

1) Keep it short and to the point. Legislators really don't read everything they get. It's not humanly possible. Often they just ask their aides to keep a tally of "yays" and "nays". Make sure you state your position clearly and firmly in the first few sentences. Make it simple: "I do not support SB 1111." Then elaborate.

2) Steer clear of stereotypes. In politics, *appearance is everything*. When you talk face-to-face about BSL to politicians and the media, you must also adopt that same philosophy. Hide your tattoos, brush your hair, put on some nice slacks and a dress shirt, stand up straight, and use good grammar. I know it doesn't seem fair that you can't just "be yourself", but the fact is, life isn't fair, and this isn't about you. It's about your rights as a citizen and your responsibilities as a dog owner. If you don't convey an attitude of respectability, you will get two negative results: first, you won't be taken seriously, and second, you will be reinforcing a negative stereotype, thereby making it much harder for all the rest of us.

3) NEVER speak or write rudely - ALWAYS be respectful and mature. As the saying goes, "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Or like my mom used to tell me, "if you want to be treated like a grown-up, you need to act like a grown-up." If you want your views to be heard, you need to be patient, open-minded, and mature. If you name-call, swear, threaten, or lash out, you risk losing your audience. Not only that, but you are reinforcing a negative stereotype ("all pit bull/Rottweiler owners are uneducated and immature"). Denver councilmembers recently expressed interest in a

non-breed-specific alternative to their draconian pit bull ban - until they started getting angry hate mail and threats from some pit bull owners. That just confirmed to them that pit bull owners are scary, angry, dangerous individuals; they now defend their BSL with fervor, and hundreds of family dogs have been put to death as a result. Don't let your passion and emotions carry you away when you speak!

4) If you choose to mention your dog, be very careful what you say. When you speak out against BSL by arguing "My pit bull is the friendliest dog on the planet and everyone loves him!", *that is not helping your case*. Your pro-BSL representative believes you own a ticking time bomb. Your protests that your dog "loves everyone" only confirms in their mind that you are in denial - and anything else you may try to say becomes more crazy talk to them. On the other hand, if you speak to the representative as a concerned citizen - not a dog owner - you are more likely to be heard and respected as an equal rather than discounted as a nutjob.

Mention your dog only if you have proof - a title, certificate, award, or other evidence - that your dog is capable of "above average" good deeds and is highly unlikely to be a "ticking time bomb." If you have a therapy dog, a search-and-rescue dog, a hero dog (which received some sort of recognition from a major group), or an obedience-titled dog, you can mention it. If your dog's credentials are average (i.e. Temperament Tested, took some agility classes, lives with a child and hasn't eaten him yet), that's great - but not good enough to get out of the "could snap at any moment" category, so it's probably best to leave him out of it. Yes, you have every right to be proud of your dog, and yes, you should tell people all about your great dog - but not when you're talking to a pro-BSL legislator. They have a tendency to tune out words from pit bull and Rottweiler owners in particular.

5) Join your representative in worrying about the human victims. Aurora Council member Bob Fitzgerald gives us a wonderful quote regarding his reasons behind supporting a pit bull ban: "The thought of one kid getting hurt is too much for me." If we think further about the context in which Fitzgerald gives this comment, he seems to be implying that he does not care about children who are attacked by dogs *other* than pit bulls. In fact, some months prior to Fitzgerald's insensitive comment, in a city very close to Aurora, a young girl was killed by two Alaskan Malamutes. This child's needless death was apparently *not* "too much" for Fitzgerald, since he shows no interest in banning Alaskan Malamutes.

This sort of exclusionary thinking is pervasive among legislators who support BSL. They are so focused on the victims of attacks committed by certain breeds of dogs that they tend to overlook victims who were attacked by less "controversial" breeds. In effect, they are minimizing the danger posed by non-targeted breeds, the fear suffered by individuals who live near a dangerous dog of a non-targeted breed, and the pain inflicted on victims of attacks committed by a non-targeted breed. Ultimately, pointing this out to representatives is helpful; politicians do not want to seem insensitive toward victims, and the only way to treat every dog attack victim equally and fairly is through



non-breed-specific legislation, where all victims are entitled to the same justice and retributions regardless of the breed of dog that injured them.

6) Provide good examples of non-breed-specific legislation that works. Identify some possible solutions to the problems your community is having with dangerous dogs. Perhaps your animal control department is underfunded and understaffed, resulting in paltry enforcement of laws. Maybe your community has a blase attitude toward leash laws and other dog laws. Perhaps school children are not getting any lessons in dog safety. Try to identify what areas need to be worked on in order to improve public safety and reduce dog bites. Offer model non-breed-specific dangerous dog legislation to replace breed-specific proposals (the AKC and the HSUS can both provide this). Our government representatives need to look like they're doing something - anything - to protect the public against vicious dogs. They automatically default toward BSL because it seems so easy, but if you give them something better, safer, and more effective...

7) Phone calls, snail mail, and fax are preferable to email. Email is *too* fast and *too* easy - our legislators get emails by the truckload, and even after weeding out the spam, they still have to sift through countless poorly written or incomprehensible emails and rantings. (I know from personal experience that some representatives don't bother checking their email at all.) Sending a letter in the mail, or, if time's a factor, sending a letter via fax, is often the best way to show that you are a concerned, involved citizen who has given a lot of thought and energy to the issue at hand. You can also make a quick phone call to express your opinion *if* you are able to control your emotions and not let any anger or anxiety leak into your voice or words.

