

# The situation in Launceston

**Peter Guest**

## INTRODUCTION

The population of Tasmania is 460,000, the population of Launceston is 72,000. There were 46 municipalities prior to a recent restructuring in July 1993 which reduced the number of municipalities to 29. I understand there are to be further reductions at the end of a five year period. Animal control up until 1987 was basically undertaken under the Local Government Act.

The control of dogs came under a state Act in 1987. Up until then each municipality relied on the Local Government Act and local byelaws. Each municipality had its own way of handling dog control which resulted in the lack of uniformity and in some areas very little control at all.

The new Act brought everyone under the same umbrella except we still have a problem with smaller municipalities not employing Animal Control Officers (ACOs) or Rangers or that particular duty is left to a health officer or some other officer who, when he has the time, attends to the problem.

This creates problems especially with a moving population such as in low income or Housing Department areas. What is enforced in one town may not be enforced in others.

The result of this can be seen when country people move into the city. In some instances they have the freedom of allowing their dogs to stray, whereas in the city this is usually strictly enforced.

Registration fees can vary between councils. The highest is \$50, which is the maximum the Act allows. The Act allows for a separate fee for:

- whole dog, male or female;
- working, purebred or greyhound;
- sterilised dog, male or female;
- pensioner, one dog only;
- pensioner, more than one dog, fees as applicable;
- guide dogs exempt.

The Act also allows for late payment penalty if paid after 31st July each year .

Launceston collects approximately \$70,000 in registration fees. The estimated population of dogs is approximately 10,000 dogs with fees ranging from \$25 down to \$4 for a pensioner. The average registration fee is \$10.

We have moved away from door to door collection for money instead we employ a part-time licensed collector who only issues \$20 on-the-spot fines for having an unregistered dog. It is our belief that by not collecting money we end up with a better result than a person who is paid a commission and issues licenses door to door .

Example: \$3,000 is paid in wages and mileage for a return of \$9,000.

Most of us know there are good and bad days for finding people at home. For those that are not at home, to save a re-visit, the type of dog and the address can be noted and an on-the-spot fine sent by certified mail.

By issuing an on-the-spot fine the onus is put directly on the owner to register the dog. It is not the fines that we are really interested in, but the registration of the dog which, is then recorded on the computer as we send out accounts each year.

Payment of accounts has increased as most dog owners now treat the accounts the same way as they would their hydro, rates or Telecom bills and pay them by the end of the month in which they are issued, that is, July.

## **DOG ATTACKS**

Over the past two years we have recorded 20 dog attacks, although there have been many more of a less serious nature which have been reported but a complaint was not made.

The dogs involved during the reported attacks are recorded and I must stress that we cannot prove their pedigree as dog owners very quickly comment if you call a dog by breed when in fact it could be a crossbred. However, German Shepherds, heelers (red and blue), Rottweilers, Border Collies, Staffordshire, bull and Pit bull terriers, Dobermans and Gordon Setters were involved in the main twenty attacks.

These involved 58 sheep killed, 17 injured, 2 dogs which rushed and knocked an elderly lady down, breaking her leg.

A twelve year old girl was in charge of 2 dogs, the large one dragged her across a road and the dogs attacked an elderly lady's poodle, severely injuring it and breaking its leg.

Another grabbed a small dog from out of a young girl's arms, attacked and killed it in front of her in the street, and it goes on.

State wide I cannot recall many serious dog attacks on humans, although all attacks are serious to the recipient of canine teeth.

The majority of attacks in the Launceston municipality occur on other dogs, stock or domestic pets. This occurs in some form, two or three times a week.

Many of the dogs that attacked, as mentioned above, were put down within a short time, if not at the time of attacking.

Very few attacks are taken to court as many of the owners are quite happy to either have the dog put down, have a proper run made for it, or an agreement with the dog owner is reached for either compensation or any vet or doctor's bills to be paid.

The Act allows for civil action regardless of any other action that may be or not be taken for the offence.

The Launceston City Council has an agreement with the local branch of the RSPCA which is paid to manage and run the pound. The Council pays for the salary for a kennel hand, \$3 a dog per day for 4 days which costs council approximately \$30,000 a year. Animal control (inclusive) costs \$120,000 a year.

I believe that this is a fair arrangement as the RSPCA encourage neutering and selectively return a percentage of the 900 dogs that are impounded each year.

We do have a problem with semi-feral cats and to some degree the true feral that lives in the country, although I do not believe the town dwelling feral is anywhere near as bad as it was in the early 80's as people become more aware of neutering. The number of complaints concerning the city feral has dropped dramatically over the past two to three years.

Our state government on the 27th October 1993, passed a new Animal Welfare Act which is administered by the RSPCA.

Under recent changes, the RSPCA, although still keeping its identity, has come under the umbrella of the Department of Primary Industry. The state has been split up into three divisions, each division being required to have an authorised officer to enforce the Act, who in part is paid by the government, but as we all know the government never fully pay for any outside organisations and the normal funding of the RSPCA is made up by various other means.

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[UAM 93 index](#)