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‘BACKYARD CHICKENS’ A GROWING TREND IN FAYETTE COUNTY

Uniontown, PA – As egg prices have risen over the past several months and even years, Fayette County residents have looked for ways to cut the cost of those and other food staples. One idea more and more people have come up with is simply raising chickens in their own backyards.

In the last several months, more than one local municipality has heard from residents either inquiring about the legality of owning chickens or lobbying for the right to do so.

“It’s a big thing right now,” Uniontown Poultry and Farm Products Association President Steve Stanish said. “It used to be, 50 or 60 years ago, almost everyone had chickens. Now, it’s kind of coming back, I guess, full circle. With all the natural foods and whole foods, people are wanting to raise their own eggs.”

It’s an idea that Todd Miner, a Connellsville Township supervisor and a member of the Fayette County Farm Bureau Board, can get behind – provided residents go about it the right way.

“I’m very mixed on that because I advocate for agriculture every day,” Miner said. “But I think that it needs to be done properly.”

Of particular concern for Miner are sanitation issues that could arise from chickens’ waste – not to mention the complaints from neighbors that are sure to follow.

“As long as there’s a plan in place and it’s legitimate, I think it’s a great thing,” he said. On the other hand, he added, without proper waste disposal, raising chickens can be problematic.

Both Stanish and Miner advised would-be chicken owners to use caution in light of continuing avian influenza outbreaks that once again saw the Fayette County Fair prohibit chickens from showing. Miner added that those looking for a way to cut costs might be disappointed.

“It’s not cheaper,” he said, pointing to the cost of chicken feed and the time owners put into the birds’ care.

But for people like Miranda Hauer and Darlene Thomas, it’s all worth it. Both women raise chickens in their backyards, not just as an egg source, but as pets.

Thomas, of Vanderbilt, said she first began raising chickens about four years ago, after the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It was something I always wanted to do," she said. "We (already) had a chicken coop outside."

The coop was left behind by previous property owners, so Thomas simply cleaned it up and began to use it for its original purpose.

Thomas said her property is in the country, and she doesn't have to worry about the chickens bothering her neighbors. Predators are another story.

"We had a fisher come through, not last year, but the year before," she said. Though she lost her entire flock to the predator, Thomas regrouped and now has "four adults and a bunch of babies."

"It's kind of like a hobby," she said. "I sell my eggs to pay for the cost of feed."

Hauer, too, said she has always wanted to own chickens.

"Even when I was a kid and I would go into the farm show and see all those little babies, I wanted them," she said.

Hauer, of North Union Township, said her chickens are pets, though they also help with pest control, as they eat insects. She said she put a great deal of time and research into how to care for her flock.

"I wanted to do it right," she said. "I didn't want them to just survive; I wanted them to thrive."

She said a safe, "predator proof" coop was a priority.

"I feel it's my responsibility to keep them safe. I wanted to make sure they had a nice, large enclosure...clean, sanitary," Hauer said, laughing, "My husband says I have bougie chickens."

Hauer said she has been reading up on chickens and watching videos on their care "for years," and she takes them to the veterinarian regularly.

"I like to act before things get out of hand," she said, noting she currently has nine chickens.

Both Thomas and Hauer said their chickens are much like any other pet.

"They have personalities," Thomas said. "If you go outside in certain areas, they'll come running right up to you."

Hauer said her experience with them has been even better than she expected. She spent a substantial amount of time with her flock when they were young, and now, she said, they will sit in her lap or on her shoulder.

"I never thought it was going to be like that," she said. "Some of them are like dogs."

Her advice to people who want to raise their own chickens is just to become educated.

“Just do your research,” Hauer said. “That’s probably your best thing. Whether they’re for food or pets, they still need to be taken care of well, and they need to be protected.”

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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