

WAINFLEET CHICKEN DEBATE GOES INTO FOWL TERRITORY

COUPLE DINGED FOR CHICKENS SAYS MOTIVATION FOR FINE LIES ELSEWHERE

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Rural living always felt like the right place for William and Miranda Miles. They wanted a little space. They wanted some fresh air.

So they packed up and left Toronto and headed for Wainfleet. Much to their surprise, they found some aspects of the countryside to be less than welcoming.

"People around here, they see my wife and her pink hair and her tattoos, and they just think we don't belong here. That we don't fit in," said William.

The irony is that for years, the Miles family felt like they didn't fit in with Toronto either. The couple longed to pick vegetables from their garden, and have some space for their pets to run around, which is how they ended up on a one-acre lot deep in rural Wainfleet.

"We always liked the idea of living in the country, that's why we came here," said Miranda Miles.

Once they got to Wainfleet, they went about doing the things they had always wanted to do but couldn't in the big city, and that included keeping a few chickens in their backyard as a source of fresh, delicious, healthy eggs. But those chickens ended up landing them hundreds of dollars in bylaw fines, and put the couple



James Culic/Torstar

Wainfleet resident William Miles stands at the site of the backyard chicken coop which is at the heart of a town-wide dustup over keeping chickens within the municipality.

at the centre of a townwide debate over backyard chickens.

"Moving here from Toronto, we would have never assumed that Wainfleet would be the place that was so strict about chickens," said Miranda. "Lots of other people around here have chickens, so we never imagined it would be a problem."

Trouble started a few months ago, according to Miranda, when their rooster managed to escape from the backyard and was running loose. The rooster had made its way into their neighbour's property, so Miranda sent her son to go retrieve the escaped fowl.

"It was running around like crazy, it was so funny seeing

them chase it," recalled Miranda with a laugh. "It was like watching an old Benny Hill sketch."

Their neighbour didn't see the humour in the situation. Soon after, a bylaw complaint was lodged, and the town came knocking on their door, issuing a fine and an order to remove the rooster, which they did. They kept the chickens though, and beefed up the backyard pen to make sure they didn't escape.

However, the newly reinforced chicken coop was no match for the wind storm that ripped through southern Niagara in October, causing extensive damage to properties in Wainfleet, Port Colborne and Fort Erie.

The storm tore down a part of

the coop, and the chickens escaped. Shortly after, the couple received another \$400 in fines from the town for allowing the chickens to escape during the aftermath of the storm.

"You'd think with everything that was going on with the storm, they'd cut people some slack, but not us," said William, who noted the town hit them with not one, but two fines that day. The chickens were spotted outside their coop at 10:30 a.m. and again at 10:46 a.m., and he said the town informed him this constituted two fines because they were "separate incidents."

The chicken debate has cropped up at multiple council meetings at town hall over the

past few weeks, with council noting it has become a major topic of discussion across Wainfleet.

As far as William can tell, the problem has less to do with his chickens, and more to do with his family, who he says have been looked down on by neighbours because they don't own the home they live in.

"They call us 'the renters' and make us feel like we don't belong here," said William, who plays in a band, Back to the 80s, in his spare time.

As for the chickens, at its most recent council meeting, Wainfleet Mayor Kevin Gibson noted that while chickens aren't officially allowed in "the hamlets" of Wainfleet, the town isn't driving around looking to enforce a chicken ban either.

"There are officially no chickens in the hamlets, but there are chickens in the hamlets," Gibson said. "If you can get along with your neighbours and the two of you, or three of you, agree to have chickens, we don't care."

While that solution works for most people in Wainfleet, according to William, it still leaves him stuck on the wrong side of the equation, and unable to house chickens the way everyone else does without incident in Wainfleet.

"It's not even about chickens," said William. "It's about some people thinking that we don't belong here, and them using the by-laws to try and run us out."

The Miles' are the first Wainfleet residents in 40 years to be issued a fine for backyard chickens.

-With files by Paul Forsyth



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