

## Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

# Stay-at-home cats a bright idea

*But licensing wandering pets isn't a priority for most York Region municipalities*

BY FRED SIMPSON  
STAFF WRITER

A Thornhill veterinarian sees no reason why cats shouldn't be treated like dogs by municipal bylaw departments.

But Newmarket is the only York Region town that has any kind of bylaw controlling cats.

And while the Toronto board of health is floating the idea of a bylaw requiring cats to be licensed and registered, most local municipalities say controlling cats isn't a priority.

"There was a time, I guess, when people thought there were so many stray cats out there it was natural for them to be free-roaming individuals," said Dr. Gary Landsberg.

But he said that was before communities became urbanized.

"Urban areas with their houses so close together are best suited for cats that either stay indoors or are strictly supervised when outside," he said.

Landsberg, who was guest speaker at a veterinarians' convention in Toronto last week, said registration would allow animal control officers to take action against trespassing cats.

"If the animal is registered, the owner could be readily identified and made to bear the responsibility," he said.

"This would enable animal control officials to also identify which cats are pets or simply ownerless strays."

### MAULED BY CAT

It would also be a way to control the stray cat population, which is more likely to carry disease and become a nuisance.

In fact, there have been two incidents this year that indicate how stray cats can cause serious problems.

Back in May, a four-year-old Woodbridge boy required 20 stitches to his face after he was mauled by a stray cat. A Richmond Hill family also had a scare when their child was attacked by a cat that wandered into their yard.

"These stray cats cause problems by howling at night, aggravating your dog, chewing up your garden and getting into the garbage," said Landsberg.

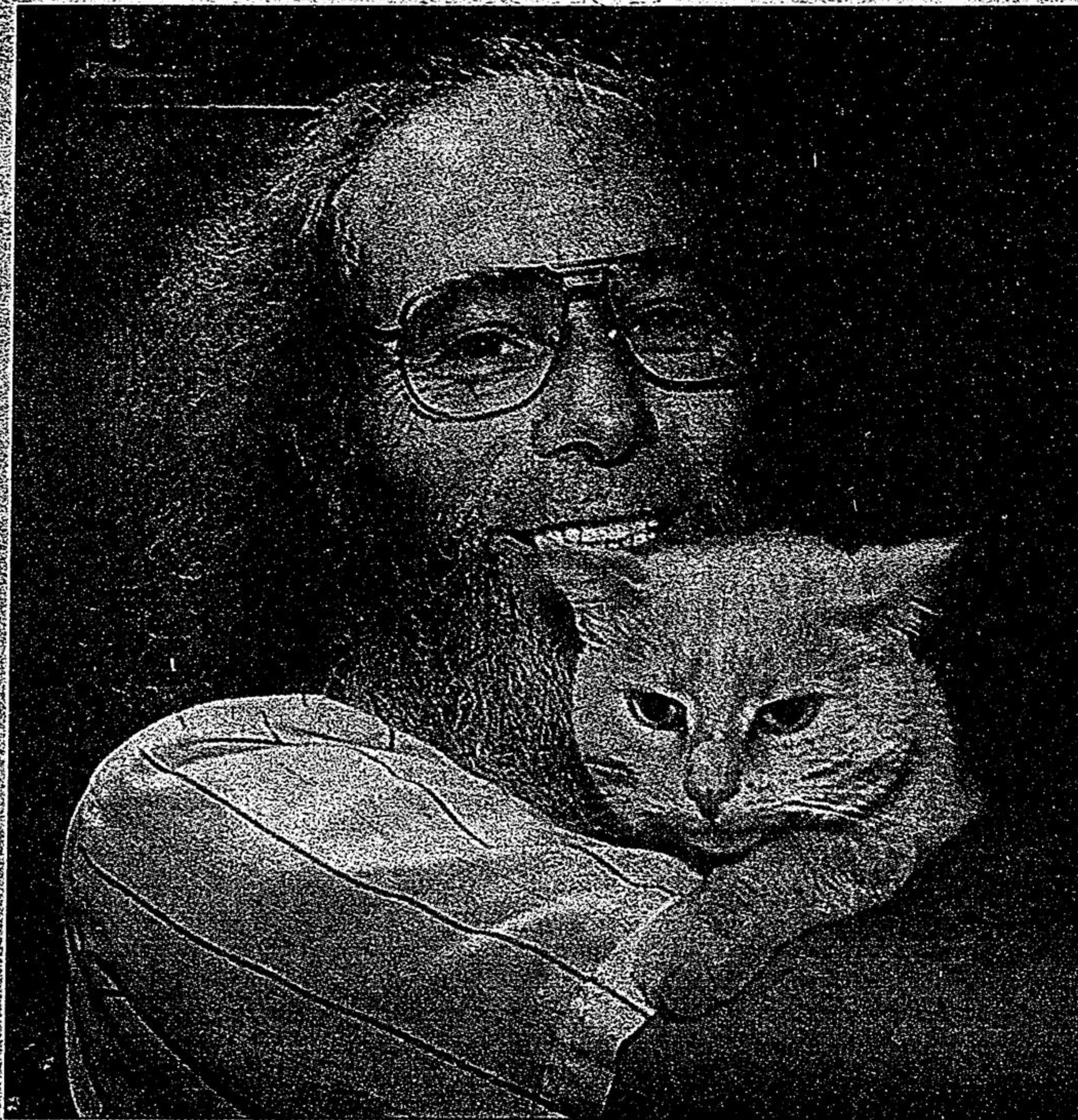
But in Landsberg's home town of Markham, there are no laws governing cats.

Clerk Bob Panizza said a cat bylaw was considered about three years ago, but has never been followed up.

Mayor Don Cousens said cat owners can register their pet with the municipality and have a computer chip implanted in the cat, but this is entirely optional.

"If your cat is ever picked up by the humane society, they will have a record saying you own it."

But Cousens said he's concerned that requiring cats to be licensed could be consid-



Richmond Hill cat lover Jeff Wakefield.

STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

ered "another tax grab by the municipality."

"If you're going to start having a license on cats, it amounts to the municipality saying, 'OK, here's another way we can pick up some more money. I think we have to justify making such a move for more reasons than that.'"

In February 1996, Newmarket council passed a controversial bylaw requiring cats to wear collars or microchips, so animal control can identify them if they are running loose.

An alternative permits the owner to place on the cat an identification tag issued by the town at a cost of \$15.

A public uproar ensued, as veterinarians warned council that cats could strangle themselves if they are forced to wear collars and the town hall received hundreds of angry calls.

"We've had no cat problems since passing the bylaw," said Rob Prentice, Newmarket's director of corporate services. "In fact, it's helped the cat situation."

He explained that Newmarket's animal control officers will take any identifiable cat they pick up, right to the owner's home. The owner is still charged a \$20 fee, but is spared the trouble of going to the pound.

Aurora Mayor Tim Jones said his town staff

is reviewing cat legislation and will bring recommendations to council.

"There seems to be opposing points of view in this matter, with some thinking they should be licensed and others that they shouldn't."

Vaughan has no cat bylaw and Councillor Susan Kadis said the city has more problems with chickens, roosters, pigeons and geese.

"I haven't had any complaints about cats," assured Kadis.

But council had a meeting recently about geese.

Sometimes they pick at the children as well as making a mess, which could become a serious health issue," said Kadis.

Richmond Hill Councillor Brenda Hogg said her town doesn't licence cats and never will, as far as she is concerned.

"It's nonsense," says Hogg. "How are you going to license them?"

The cost of administering it would far outweigh what the cats are doing.

And requiring cats to wear collars is also a non-flyer for Hogg.

"Cats climb trees, dogs don't," she said. "If a cat gets hung up in a tree, it dies if it has a collar on."

**Consulting a vet can minimize pet problems**

**B**ehavioral problems are the primary reason dogs are given up to animal shelters, says Thornhill veterinarian and pet behaviorist Dr. Gary Landsberg.

"One of the best ways an owner can avoid behavior and aggression problems is through the proper selection of a pet," said Landsberg.

"Consulting a veterinarian before selecting a pet can help the owner identify potential problems and compatibilities," he said.

"This will lessen the chance that the same pet will end up in an animal shelter a year or two down the road."

Landsberg also advises prospective pet owners to determine if they have enough space, time and money available to care properly for a pet.

Furthermore, it is important to carefully consider an animal's age, sex, breed, health and individual traits to determine if the pet's characteristics will complement your lifestyle," he said.

"Keep in mind that some animals are more territorial and predatory than others by nature and may not be suitable pets," he said.

The best time, he said, to rid a pet of unwanted behavioral problems is when it is young.

"Spaying or neutering greatly reduces mounting and roaming," he said.

"Making sure the pet gets enough exercise will lessen the occurrence of destructiveness, hyperactivity and exploratory behavior."

The pet should also be introduced to new people and situations early in life to ensure it is properly socialized, he said.

Landsberg is a speaker at the 50th anniversary Convention of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) which is taking place this week in Toronto.

— Fred Simpson



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