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A Feel-Good Lafayette Chicken Story

By Sophie Braccini



Shelly Digiovanna with the Apartments' chickens
Photo Sophie Braccini

The code in Lafayette regarding chickens is clear: in commercial districts and on properties of less than an acre, there shall be no chickens. If you live in an area not allowing farm animals, the City can, and does, ask you to get rid of your feathered friends within four days.

That's what happened to the resident manager of the Acalanes Apartments off Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Not aware of city regulations, and with the support of (most of) the tenants and their children, Shelly Digiovanna installed a chicken coop with 13 chickens and was sharing upkeep and eggs among the tenants, when she got a note from Code Enforcement Officer Mark Robbins to remove them.

"I typically act when a complaint is filed or if I observe a violation," Robbins said, "then I have to act to enforce the City municipal code."

In desperation, Digiovanna contacted Lafayette resident Papa John who teaches chicken upkeep classes and knows the municipal code inside and out. He suggested contacting next-door property owner Temple Isaiah, which has enough land to accommodate livestock. After a few emotional days during which Digiovanna discussed options with the City and tried to find a solution, Temple Isaiah, which is zoned to accommodate chickens, was happy to provide a piece of land and work out a mutually-beneficial arrangement.

"We have a piece of property adjacent to the apartments' vegetable garden that we do not use," said Michael Liepman, Executive Director at the Temple. "It was not a difficult decision for us to make." He added that the new coop will not be a long-distance field trip for the children of the Temple's pre-school. "We are happy we saved Acalanes Apartments' chickens and the coop will also benefit the children."

"We at the Apartments will continue to tend to the chickens and we will be able to double their number," said Digiovanna. "There will be plenty of eggs to share."

"I'm happy that a good solution was found," said Robbins. "When residents started working with us toward a solution we could apply some discretion in the implementation of the code, as long as there was no immediate hazard." Robbins added that he has noticed an increase in chicken activity in Lafayette. This year alone he's received about 20 chicken complaints in Lafayette and in some cases people had to remove the fowl. "People are free to try to petition to change the rules, but as long as the

code is the way it is, we will enforce it," he said.

Residents can find more information about the City's municipal code online at ci.lafayette.ca.us.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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