Carriage Horse Controversy Extends Beyond New York City

Legislation that could be introduced to the New York City council that would ban the use of horse-drawn carriages in the city is drawing criticism from carriage operators as well as from a veterinarian who believes such a ban is not necessarily in the horses’ best interest.

Last year, Allie Feldman, executive director of New Yorkers for Clean, Livable, and Safe Streets (NYCLASS), called for a citywide ban on horse-drawn carriages and, in January, newly elected New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio said he would back any legislation that would ban the operation of horse-drawn carriages in the city. However, Feldman told The Horse in February that, so far, no legislation has reached the city council.

Carriage owners and operators oppose such legislation on grounds that their industry is already heavily regulated, and their horses are well-protected under a current law. Stephen Malone, spokesman for the Horse and Carriage Association of New York and a 30-year owner/operator of New York City carriages, said a 2010 ordinance requires that carriage horses have at least five weeks of vacation annually, bigger stalls, and quality veterinary and farrier care.

Malone said the proposed ordinance would force him to relinquish his horses: “These horses are not just business assets to me, they are my business partners.”

The lack of work is one reason why Sarah Ralston, VMD, PhD, Dipl. ACVN, a professor in the Rutgers University Department of Animal Sciences, opposes legislation that would ultimately force these horses into retirement on yet-unspecified farms. Ralston said regular work and a set routine helps keep horses healthy and enhances their quality of life.

“The carriage horses, on the whole, are showing no signs of distress or unwillingness to work when asked to do so,” asserted Ralston. More importantly, she said, such legislation sets a dangerous precedent for horses as well as for the humans who look after them.

“If a horse is in its stall without access to pasture, but is getting quality basic care and regular exercise, should we say that this horse is being abused, or is it cruel to ask a horse to do a job that it is well-trained for and capable of doing without distress?” Ralston said. “This is the norm for a majority of the horses kept in urban and suburban settings, and this (kind of legislation) sends a terrible precedent that should have the entire horse industry up in arms.”

Meanwhile, Feldman declined to comment on whether NYCLASS will talk with horse-drawn carriage operators and others about what the proposed ordinance should contain.

“We intend to make sure our ordinance is fair and equitable to all parties,” Feldman said.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in three other U.S. cities are re-examining their own rules governing horse-drawn carriages.

In Philadelphia, Mark McDonald, press secretary to Mayor Michael Nutter, said the city has no current plans to ban horse carriages. Instead, a working group is reviewing the city’s current regulations.

In Salt Lake City, City Council Chairman Charlie Luke said council members voted to support an amendment to the city’s existing ordinance on Feb. 4. In part, the amendment regulates the ages of carriage horses and requires carriage companies to educate the public about how carriage horses are cared for. Luke also said the ordinance puts under contract the company that provides horse-drawn carriages in Salt Lake City, which “gives us more leverage to regulate the industry,” he said.

Finally, in Chicago, Donal Quinlan, press secretary to alderman Ed Burke, said Burke introduced legislation on Feb. 5 that would cease the city’s issue of new horse-drawn carriage licenses until all such licenses have expired, effectively eliminating carriage licenses. That ordinance, which is backed by Mayor Rham Emanuel, remains pending in the Chicago city council.—Pat Raia