

CAPITAL REGION

Furry tenants aren't always welcome

Pet policies vary greatly among area rental properties

BY JOHN CROPLEY *Gazette Business Editor*

Around the turn of each month, there's an upswing in dogs and cats being left at animal shelters for one sad but unavoidable reason: Their owners are moving to apartments that don't allow pets.

It's a sad moment all around, as people leave behind a dog or cat that has been a member of the family for months or years, and the pet that's had the run of the house or yard is placed in a cage.

There's a big market for pet-friendly rentals, but never quite enough in the right locations with the right fine-print details, said Deb Balliet, executive director of the Animal Protective Foundation in Glenville, which on its website provides links to online databases of apartments where pets are allowed.

"There are more and more places that are offering it," she said.

"Of course, they charge more," she added, and many landlords impose size and breed restrictions on dogs or exclude dogs entirely, welcoming only cats.

The Mohawk Hudson Humane Society in Menands said a full 24 percent of the pets it takes in are surrendered for housing-related reasons, and the three most common days of the month for this to happen are the 3rd, 1st and 28th.

Pet-friendly rentals are out there, but an apartment hunter with Fido in tow will need a little time and patience to find one.

A cluster of apartment complexes on the Schenectady-Niskayuna border is an example of the patchwork of restrictions and regulations:

› Tri City Rentals allows pets at its Sheridan Apartments but not its nearby Hampshire Apartments.

› Hillcrest Village, run by Morgan Community, welcomes almost all pets, with some very specific exceptions: No more than two per unit, no more than 100 pounds each, and no Akitas, chows, Dobermans, wolf hybrids, pit bulls, Staffordshire terriers or Rottweilers.



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Marguerite Pearson, marketing and communications manager for the Mohawk Hudson Humane Society in Menands, poses with Icesis on Thursday. The 12-year-old pit bull arrived at the shelter on Oct. 3 because her owner could not take her with him when he moved into a new apartment.

There's a monthly surcharge of \$20 per cat and \$35 per dog.

> Netherlands Village, run by Dawn Homes Management, allows only cats and imposes restrictions on them.

Tri-City and Morgan did not return calls for comment for this story, and Dawn would not comment.

The newest apartment community on the Niskayuna-Schenectady border is Willowbrook Terrace, run by Solomon Organization, which does allow pets.

Spokesman Ron Simoncini said Solomon operates 3,000 rental units across the Capital Region in numerous apartment complexes. It tailors its pet policy individually to fit each site. It would, for example, bar large dogs from a complex with small apartments and little green space outside, but it allows them at a location with more elbow room.

He said Solomon does exclude some dog breeds, based on other organizations' guidelines, but it welcomes most pets.



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Above, Left: This is Hunny, a 7-year-old domestic shorthair whose owner surrendered her to the Mohawk Hudson Human Society in Menands on Sept. 2 because a new landlord does not allow pets.



JOHN CROPLEY/GAZETTE BUSINESS EDITOR

Above: Deb Balliet, executive director of the Animal Protective Foundation in Glenville, is shown in her office on Tuesday.

"Almost any dog, and certainly any cat, can find a home at one of our complexes," he said.

Simoncini cited several reasons for Solomon's policy:

- › Pets encourage social interaction, which builds a sense of community.
- › Pet owners move less frequently, creating stability within an apartment complex.
- › Allowing pets creates a broader pool of potential customers.

The Solomon Organization has had very few problems with disruptive pets or bad pet owners, Simoncini said.

"Generally speaking, pet owners treat their pets like family members, and they're very well cared for."

DOGVILLE

There are pet-friendly apartment complexes, and then there are pets-are-welcome complexes. It's more than a semantic distinction: Pet-welcome is a designation by the Humane Society of the United States that denotes something open to pets without size or breed restrictions.

Construction is underway on what developers say is the first such rental complex in the Capital Region — Van Allen Apartments in North Green-bush. It's a joint project by Amedore Homes and Sunrise Management & Consulting



Left: "Gabby" is shown Tuesday at the Animal Protective Foundation's shelter in Glenville. The 5-month-old bullmastiff puppy is waiting for a new home after her previous owner had to surrender her in late September due to housing limitations.

and is both the first apartment project for Amedore, a homebuilder, and the first pet-welcome complex for Sunrise, which owns or manages 1,500 rental units.

Sunrise President Jesse Holland said the company's other properties allow some pets, but with the same size and breed restrictions so many other apartment complexes impose. He explained that this was based on recommendations from veterinarians and other experts that breeds like pit bulls and Rottweilers are inherently dangerous, but he's come to doubt that.

Van Allen, which will allow up to three dogs of any size and breed, may be a turning point for Sunrise, Holland said. If the looser restrictions don't cause problems there, Sunrise will likely change the rules at its other properties.

"We are quite hopeful that we will extend this, but we are going to test it first," he said.

"Up until this project, the working theory was you wanted to limit the size of the pet," he said. "There was concern in general dealing with large animals, the damage they could do. Educating ourselves, we felt there was an opportunity here."

That research included a visit to a pet-welcome apartment complex in New Hampshire that is home to 350 dogs. They also attended a training session by the Mohawk Hudson Humane Society on how to manage a pet-friendly or pet-welcome apartment complex.

Holland said the focus must be on the individual dog, not its size or pedigree. A “tiny yap-yap dog” that barks all day is likely more annoying to neighbors than the 140-pound Great Dane that sleeps all day, he said. Poorly socialized dogs of any breed are more dangerous than a well-behaved pit bull.

Part of the MHHS training showed how to do a meet-and-greet with dogs and look at their behavior to see if they'd make a good neighbor. Every dog will have to pass this test before being allowed to live at Van Allen. There's also a cheek-swab DNA sample required, so that if someone isn't cleaning up after their dog, the feces can be tested and genetically traced back to the dog that deposited it.

Owners who don't clean up after their dogs will face a schedule of increasing fines.

Van Allen is designed to be dog-friendly, with two dog parks, walking trails, a dog-washing station and partnerships with groomers, trainers, vets and pet-sitters in the area.

It seems to be finding an audience — more than 200 people picked up information from Sunrise at the Capital Region Pet Expo that The Daily Gazette and Benson's Pet Center staged in Saratoga Springs last month, Holland said.

“It's become a very good marketing tool. We're having a tremendous amount of interest.”

SAYING GOODBYE

People who have to give up their pets when they move can feel anger or frustration at their situation. But the main emotion is sadness for themselves and for the animal, said Balliet, at the Animal Protective Foundation.

“Most people love their pets and it's tearing their hearts out to lose them,” she said.

Beyond that, she said, it's harder to make generalizations about the people or their dogs and cats or their circumstances — the APF shelter staff doesn't always get a full or accurate account of what brought them to the shelter. “Some people tell us the truth, some don't,” Balliet said.

On Tuesday, there were five dogs at the APF shelter waiting for new homes after losing their previous families in mid- to late September for housing-related reasons:

- › Bear, a smallish Lab-terrier mix who had barked himself hoarse.
- › Levi, a jowly pit bull who was quite mellow until reminded there was a tennis ball under his sleeping platform.
- › Pennie, a terrier mix who seemed to take umbrage at the barking of her kennelmates.
- › Asuna, a quiet Akita waiting to be spayed and therefore not yet available for adoption.
- › And Gabby, an exuberant 5-month-old bullmastiff

mix. (The puppy was the most recent arrival of the five dogs and also the first to be adopted — on Thursday, she went home with her new family.

Dogs get more bad publicity than cats because they are bigger and potentially more dangerous, disruptive or destructive, but plenty of landlords don't want cats in their rental units, either.

On Tuesday there was a whole platoon of cats and kittens recently surrendered to APF for housing reasons, a notable surge even for a shelter where cats generally far outnumber dogs.

The sign outside the APF facility sums it up nicely, in big black letters:

CATS CATS CATS

WE GOT CATS

BIG SMALL BLACK WHITE

ADOPT ONE TODAY

As of Thursday, there were 91 cats and 15 dogs at the shelter, plus 32 more cats and one dog in off-site foster care.

APF offers training classes for pets and their owners that can make them better tenants, Balliet said.

TRAINING LANDLORDS

The Mohawk Hudson Humane Society is looking at the Sunrise/Amedore pet-welcome apartment project as a pilot program of its own.

It wants to see if the landlord training it provided to site managers at Van Allen Apartments is both effective and affordable, and if so wants to provide it to other property managers to reduce the number of pets being brought into the MHHS shelter for housing reasons.

"If we can solve some of those problems for landlords and make it easier for them to allow pets, that makes a big difference," said Todd Cramer, vice president of operations at MHHS. He said national statistics show housing availability to be the single largest cause of pet surrenders.

The MHHS training for the Van Allen crew included reading canine and feline body language to recognize stress and tell the difference between fear and aggression; how to make a pet introduction; how to enter an apartment with a pet inside; safety equipment that should be kept on hand; and veterinary medical guidelines.

"Apartments either don't allow pets at all or are very restrictive in what they allow," said Cramer. "What I like about Van Allen apartments is that they go beyond pet-friendly."

He lists some of the same reasons as Sunrise and Solomon for allowing pets: Pet owners are better tenants, and pet-friendly apartments are easier to fill but need to be filled less often. Pet owners stay in a unit for an average of 46 months, he said, compared with 18 months for non-pet owners.

Cramer is one of those affected by the scarcity of pet-friendly rental housing — even the Van Allen project is off-limits to him, as he has three dogs and a cat, one more animal than Van Allen allows.

He was unable to find something he could afford when he relocated here in March, and now lives in a friend's house near Lee, Massachusetts, 52 miles from his office in Menands.

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