

## MARION COUNTY

# Can pit bulls be saved?

**Indianapolis' new Animal Care and Control chief wants to try. It won't be easy. Pit bull bites in the city are at a record high, and of 3,000 pit bulls in animal care here last year, nearly 2,500 were euthanized.**

By Heather Gillers

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The last mayor tried to ban them. Animal control officials put them to death.

But Indianapolis' new shelter director wants to deal with pit bulls in a different way. He wants to rehabilitate them.

"I really want to give every dog the last possible chance I can," said Douglas Rae, who took over Animal Care and Control last month.

An examination of animal control records by The Indianapolis Star shows that pit bull bites are at a record high -- 282 in 2008, an increase of 33 percent from the previous year and about three times the total from 2006.

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In addition, an ordinance adopted two years ago to try to hold owners more accountable has failed. The new rule netted just one person who wouldn't already have been punished under previous laws. All the while, bites are increasing, and horrific maulings, such as one last week on a 68-year-old woman, keep happening.

"I know I'm going to have some very spirited conversations with people," Rae said.

### An ongoing debate

The dogs' defenders -- who successfully thwarted a proposal to ban pit bulls from the city two years ago -- say they are peaceful, playful dogs that if raised and cared for properly pose no greater risk than other breeds.

Their detractors, however, note that the dogs disproportionately fall into the hands of owners who mistreat them and train them to be dangerous menaces -- powerful, vicious and capable of horrific unprovoked attacks.

The Star's review of dog bites found that pit bulls not only are responsible for more bites than any other breed, but that those bites more often cause significant damage.

One week ago, 68-year-old Brenda Hill was savagely mauled by a neighbor's two pit bulls while taking out the trash at her house on Indianapolis' Northside. She remained hospitalized Saturday and was listed in fair condition.

Not surprisingly, some are skeptical of Rae's plan to end the shelter's policy of routinely euthanizing pit bulls and to adopt out as many as he can.

Caress Garten, who was attacked by two pit bulls 16 years ago while walking in a park in Indianapolis, thinks the shelter policy of euthanizing the dogs was a "check on the numbers entering the community."

"The more pit bulls," she said, "the higher the number of maulings."

But Rae's approach is applauded by others.

Last year, about 3,000 pit bulls ended up at Indianapolis' city-run shelter -- and nearly 2,500 of them were euthanized. Rae said he will hire a full-time professional to evaluate whether dogs are docile enough to be adopted out, aggressive enough to need intermediate foster care, or so aggressive that they have to be euthanized.

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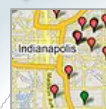


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