Public Invited to Comment on Proposed County Rabies Rules

The City-County Board of Health is taking public comments until March 1 on proposed rules to help control the spread of rabies in Lewis and Clark County.

The board opened the public comment period at its regular meeting Jan. 24. It will hold a public hearing Feb. 28 at 1 p.m. in Room 330 of the City-County Building, 316 N. Park Ave.

The draft rules are available on the Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH) website at www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org.

“Rabies is unquestionably a condition of public health importance,” Eric Merchant, administrator of the LCPH Disease Control and Prevention Division, told the board. “This proposed regulation is aimed at preventing disease and ensuring effective and timely treatment for our residents.”

Rabies is a deadly but preventable and treatable disease most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal. Most rabies cases occur in wild animals, like bats, skunks, raccoons, and foxes. But domestic animals and livestock can also get infected and can pass the virus on to humans.

The health department is recommending the proposed rules because existing local laws and regulations don’t specifically give it the authority to prevent and control rabies. The Board of Health, through the health department, can currently only regulate vicious, nuisance, and at-large dogs. It can’t require rabies vaccination, animal quarantine for disease evaluation, or other procedures for addressing potential human rabies exposure.

The proposal would apply throughout the county, except in the city of Helena, which already addresses rabies through its animal-control regulations.

Merchant said the rules aren’t in response to public concerns.

“Instead, we have elected to proactively address the issue rather than wait and then react if problems arise,” he said.
Under the proposed rules, all dogs, cats, and ferrets would have to be vaccinated against rabies and get regular booster shots. Owners of these animals would be prohibited from selling or giving away their pet if it isn’t vaccinated.

Law enforcement, health-care officials, and veterinarians would be required to report potential rabies exposures to the health department. LCPH would be responsible for investigating the incidents and responding as appropriate to keep people healthy and safe.

Anyone violating the rules would be subject to a fine ranging from $10 to $200.

The public can comment on the draft rules by email to publichealth@lccountymt.gov or by mail to Lewis and Clark Public Health, c/o Jolene Helgerson, 1930 Ninth Ave., Helena, MT 59601. Individuals can use the same addresses to request a copy of the draft rules.