

Critics blast plan to study restricting firearms use

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Spartanburg County Council's effort to begin looking at ways to prohibit firing guns in densely populated areas is being met by opposition from some residents.

Council members want to develop an ordinance because of complaints they have received from residents about neighbors holding target practice with small-caliber guns in their backyards. Some residents are concerned the practice is dangerous in heavily populated areas.

On Monday, council is expected to appoint members to a citizen's advisory committee that will offer suggestions on how to address the problem. But some residents don't agree that the county needs to look at the issue.

"These opinions seem to be based on a lot of emotion," county resident Kellet Stephens said. "How many people have been hit by inadvertent gunfire? Is this a committee issue, or is this something more emotional?"

Currently, there are no regulations on discharging of firearms in neighborhoods of unincorporated areas in the county. However, the city of Spartanburg has an ordinance that prohibits such actions.

Stephens, a Marine Corps veteran who lives in a subdivision off Fernwood Glendale Road, said he believes a proposed gun discharge ordinance infringes on his rights to safely hunt deer in his yard. It pigeonholes responsible gun owners with those who unsafely handle firearms, he said.

"To be told what I can't do on my property, what I'm safely and lawfully doing ... then it's a bit offensive that I would take someone's child and take their safety for granted when I have three of them myself," Stephens said.

Stephens has gone through years of training and experience to become precise and safe with his firearms, he said.

He said for those being unsafe, law enforcement should be able to charge them with negligence without prohibiting other gun owners from using their firearms on their property.

Under state statute, the county is able to regulate the careless or negligent discharging of firearms.

Stephens said for those shooting beer cans on rocks near children that might cause ricochets, law enforcement should be able to charge them with negligence without a blanket ordinance.

"Why don't we go the route of the law? Instead we want to form a committee to pass an ordinance," Stephens said.

County Councilman David Britt said he has received positive feedback thus far in preparation for the committee member appointments Monday.

“A lot of people are calling and saying we want to serve on this committee. They're saying that they live in subdivisions and say it's a problem, and we're glad you're tackling it.”

The committee will be comprised of Deputy County Administrator Jim Hipp, a county attorney, a member of the Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office and citizen representatives from each of the county council districts.

Council Chairman Jeff Horton has said only select areas in Spartanburg County are seeing problems with people firing weapons too close to others.

“It's all about density of a neighborhood and whether a person is going to hunt in a neighborhood,” he said. “To be deer hunting in a neighborhood is not wise.”

Others who support the committee say it's only a matter of time until someone gets hurt.

“We live within walking distance from Jesse Boyd (Elementary) and McCracken (Middle schools) ... and definitely in a dense residential area,” said Marie McGee, a resident living near Spartanburg. “Weapons and neighborhoods do not go together as far as I am concerned.”

McGee said she lives in the Pine Acres neighborhood off of Fernwood Glendale Road and have heard high-powered weapons being fired nearby.

“Public safety and common sense should prevail,” she said.

To Stephens, he is using common sense, he said, although he is not far from Fernwood Glendale Road or Jesse Boyd Elementary School. He said the Sheriff's Office has been called out to his residence by neighbors about six times.

“I understand people's fears, but we're talking about neighbors aren't we? Go talk to them, and you can understand whether what they're doing is safe or negligent,” he said.

Recent comments on the Spartanburg Tea Party website weigh the odds of a potential ordinance – some are adamantly against any type of ordinance while others understand the fear of some families and are open to determining how best to handle the issue.

Spartanburg tea party leader Karen Martin said she believes the council is taking the “most practical” and “fairest” approach to studying the issue by involving community stakeholders and residents.

“From what I understand, our council has researched this problem. They're kind of going through this to try and find the best plan. .. It's never been addressed,” she said. “Nobody's going to take away anyone's guns. Nobody's looking to remove anyone's ways to protect their homes or families.”

She said those who fear an infringement on gun rights should “calm down.”

“The Second Amendment guarantees the right to bear arms,” Martin said. “There's no constitutional right without probable cause to shoot a gun 20 feet away from a 2-year –old.”

Sheriff Chuck Wright has been a vocal proponent of responsible gun ownership throughout his tenure in office. He said he has to ensure that both gun rights are not infringed upon and residents are kept safe.

“I never want to have a child or some innocent person, for that matter, that get harmed by a stray bullet because somebody doesn't know how to do those kind of

things,” Wright said of discharging firearms.

Rather than commit to a gun discharge ordinance, Wright said it will be beneficial to have the discussion to determine what actions could or should be taken.

“Maybe we’ll come up with something better,” he said.

Wright added that perhaps just a select few subdivisions could have ordinances rather than encompassing all Spartanburg County residents.

The Sheriff’s Office patrol division commander Tim Metz said the county has not yet contacted him to serve on the committee, but he said he welcomes the idea to discuss the issue to determine what is best for the residents of the county.

The questions for him are what would constitute a densely populated area and how law enforcement would apply the ordinance.

“I know it’s going to be a difficult debate, and I look forward to getting those thoughts and feeling from the committee,” Metz said. “I don’t know what will become of it. It’s a very contentious topic.”

More important than ordinance, Stephens said education is key.

“The problem is they don’t understand ballistics,” Stephens said of those taking a course to obtain a concealed weapons permit without studying the skill and safety of firearms. Rather than restrict the use, he advises people to practice with their firearm as long as it is done with intent and safety in mind.

“I made a model airplane at one time, I’m not going to go get a job at Boeing,” he said. “The issue is that shooting a firearm is going to make you a better shot.”

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