

Step-by-Step Instructions for Changing the Law Where You Live

1. Find others to help – Use the Internet to find like-minded people and form a group. Use the forum on BackyardChickens.com and/or our Chicken Chat room. Your posting title should say something like “Help me change the law in Salem, OR” so people in your town will see it right away and click on it to read more. Form a group, give yourselves a name and a logo, start a website/blog/yahoo group, etc.

2. Understand the current laws in your city - The first step to changing your city’s code to permit backyard chickens is to understand the current legal status where you live. You have to know if chickens are allowed under specific conditions that need to be amended, or if you will need to draft an ordinance from scratch. Don’t go by what you’ve heard because chances are this information is inaccurate or incomplete. It’s always best to get it straight from the horse’s mouth, and in writing.

Most city ordinances are available online. Start with the city’s official website, look under Code Enforcement or Zoning, that sort of thing. Once you find the city’s codes, search for key words like “livestock, poultry, fowl, and chickens.” You may have to search under different sections separately, like the section about Animals or Sanitation. Be creative, think of every possible way it might be listed. Also be sure to search under your city’s definition section. In Salem, for example, the definition of livestock includes chickens and in another section it states that livestock is not allowed in the city. However, in the Land Use section, there is a list of approved “special uses” including the keeping of a pot-bellied pig. This provided good leverage for our fight (think about it . . . you can have a 100-pound pig in the city but not a 3-pound bird that gives you eggs!) Look for things like that to help your case. Then, we strongly urge you to contact your local code compliance officer to verify that your interpretation of the code is correct.

3. Find out what nearby cities are doing - Email the code compliance office, mayor’s office, city commissioners, etc., in nearby chicken-friendly towns and ask them how their chicken-keeping policy works and if they consider it a success. Draft an ordinance, or amendment to an existing ordinance, that is practical for your town (most cities don’t allow roosters, limit the number of hens to 6 or less, and have 20’ setbacks from property lines, etc.). See attached table summarizing restrictions in 44 cities. Follow suit, making yours similar to what others around you have done and are proven to work. Don’t press your luck by trying to allow roosters, ducks, goats, etc. Keep it simple.

4. Put together an informational packet – Based on the information you collected about your current laws, and what nearby cities are doing, modify our Research Packet accordingly, making it appropriate for your area. Include letters of support you have gathered. Be factual and cite references. Be sure to include maps, charts, graphs, tables, and pictures. Add a table of contents and make it easy to locate information.

5. Recruit support from local agencies – Now that you have put together an informational packet of your own, send it to local neighborhood associations and offer to give presentations at their upcoming meetings. Email your packets to the heads of agencies that promote sustainability, gardening, feeding the hungry, etc., and ask for their endorsement. Add these to your packet, which will continue to grow and need to be continuously updated.

6. Get the media involved – I know it's scary to get the media involved and risk inviting opposition, but believe me, you will find a lot more support than you think once the word gets out. You will discover that there are a lot of illegal chicken owners out there who want to get involved because they are tired of hiding and having to worry. Contact your local newspaper's "environmental" reporter and try to get a living green story published. Once this hits city hall, the media will be contacting you (not the other way around). Imagine my surprise when I got an email from a reporter at the Wall Street Journal! Then an Associated Press reporter contacted me! Next, it was Oregon Public Broadcasting's "Think Out Loud" show. Even if the articles are not as favorable as you had hoped (which is often the case), remember that ANY exposure is good exposure in this situation.

7. Take it to City Hall – Okay, you've done all the research, garnered support, and printed a professional and factual packet. Now it's time to contact your city councilor and ask that this issue be put on the agenda. It's best to have the issue supported and "hosted" by a councilor, but if that's not possible, find out how your city council meetings function and if there is an opportunity for open public comment. That's what we had to do here in Salem. They refused to put us on the agenda, so we took advantage of the open public comment period at the end of every city council meeting. We handed out packets and had various speakers read prepared speeches. Consider wearing our Viva la Chicken Revolution T-shirts to city hall! Learn the protocol for bringing an item up for discussion with your public officials. For example, here, we have to sign up ahead of time and each speaker is allowed 3 minutes.

8. Follow through - Plan on this taking months to accomplish, and that's after you've invested several months preparing. Changing a city ordinance

is not easy or quick. Be persistent. If they think you will give up and go away, they will stall and try to avoid the issue. Make sure they understand you are serious and determined, but remain polite, professional, and factual at all costs.