

## **Pigeon Feeding**

<b>Date:</b>	May 5, 2008
<b>To:</b>	Board of Health
<b>From:</b>	Medical Officer of Health
<b>Wards:</b>	All
<b>Reference Number:</b>	

### **SUMMARY**

---

Large number of pigeons (more properly known as the Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*) in urban settings can result in damage to private property and impair the enjoyment and use of private and public property, but only rarely cause disease in people. This report provides information on Toronto Public Health's response to health issues posed by pigeons. In addition, strategies for addressing excessive pigeon feeding at the municipal level in Ontario and elsewhere are described.

This report is submitted in response to the Board of Health (February 26, 2008) request to report on ways to curtail excessive feeding of pigeons and to include information on what other municipalities are doing in this regard.

From time to time, City officials receive public complaints relating to the excessive feeding of pigeons. In these situations, large numbers of birds (hundreds) are attracted to neighbourhoods where they create a public nuisance; interfere with the enjoyment and use of private property; and cause property damage. In rare situation where pigeons may pose a risk to people's health, Toronto Public Health (TPH) can intervene under existing provincial legislation. This report provides current and historical information to inform the Board on this issue.

#### **Financial Impact**

There are no financial impacts for the City resulting from this report.

#### **DECISION HISTORY**

At its meeting on February 26, 2008, the Board of Health received a letter from Councillor Fletcher in which concerns were expressed about the excessive feeding of large flocks of pigeons and the amount of pigeon waste that is accumulating in Ward 30

in Toronto. The Board of Health asked the Medical Officer of Health to report back to the Board at its meeting in May 2008 on ways to curtail excessive feeding of large flocks of pigeons and to include information on what other municipalities are doing in this regard.

## **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

Many cities around the world have at some point had to deal with problems caused by large flocks of pigeons. The pigeon's natural diet consists of grains and seed, but they most often survive on scavenged food discarded in the urban setting. These birds are highly sociable in behaviour. They tend to gather together in flocks and do not have many effective predators in the city environment. They can produce offspring at the age of six months and can breed as often as six times a year under ideal conditions where ample food and nesting sites are available.

Over the years, Toronto Public Health and other City By-law Enforcement Divisions have dealt with complaints about damage to property and potential health risks caused by pigeons. These complaints have in general related to conditions where pigeons were being fed in large numbers or in situations where they were provided with roosting or harbourage sites, such as under bridges or in abandoned buildings.

In Toronto, complaints relating to pigeons gathering in very large numbers are uncommon. However, when they do occur, these complaints tend to demand significant staff time and resources. The City of Toronto does not have a great deal of information about the extent of the pigeon population in Toronto and there is currently no legislation in the City to adequately deal with the property damage and nuisance aspect of large urban pigeon populations.

## **COMMENTS**

### **Pigeons and Public Health**

It has been Toronto Public Health's experience that the majority of pigeon complaints in the city relate to the fouling of buildings and sidewalks as a result of pigeons roosting on structures or the availability of a food source. However, in rare situations, when pigeons gather in large numbers in residential settings as a result of deliberate excessive feeding, they may cause damage to private property; they create a public nuisance and affect the enjoyment and use of private and public property.

For the two year period from January 2006 to December 2007, a total of 242 complaints relating to pigeons were received by Toronto Public Health (to put this in perspective, in New York City, the local authority deals with more than 300 pigeon complaints a month). During this time, only 4 cases of excessive feeding of pigeons (hundreds of birds) were encountered.

Toronto Public Health reviewed the scientific literature in 2001 and in 2008 and confirmed that the risk to human health from exposure to large flocks of pigeons in urban settings is very low. The health risks of feral pigeons were also examined

by researchers in Basel, Switzerland as part of developing a systematic approach to pigeons in that city (Haag-Wackernagel, D. and H. Moch. Health hazards of feral pigeons. Journal of Infection 2004). They examined all published studies on this issue from 1941 to 2003 and concluded that the health risks to people were very low. The information from these reviews has provided the basis for the policy and procedures presently employed by TPH when investigating pigeon complaints.

In the rare situations where large amounts of pigeon faeces are encountered that may constitute a health hazard (inches in thickness and in confined spaces), Toronto Public Health has the legislative authority under Section 13 of the Health Protection and Promotion Act to address the problem.

Currently, Toronto Animal Services enforces legislation relating to the way in which “owned” pigeons are kept on private property and the Parks Forestry and Recreation Division regulates the feeding of birds on parkland under their jurisdiction. Legislation in the City of Toronto does not address the problem of bird feeding or bird harbourage on sites outside parks.

### **Municipal Strategies for Pigeon Control**

A scan of pigeon control legislation available in surrounding jurisdictions reveals that many Local Authorities regulate the keeping of pigeons but not the feeding of feral pigeons. The City of Hamilton appears to be the exception. That city has legislation that is designed to deal specifically with the nuisance aspect of feral pigeons (available at: <http://www.myhamilton.ca/NR/rdonlyres/636634BE-D1D9-4FE2-935B-878C22B28440/0/02136.pdf>). Hamilton staff advises that despite having this legislation, their work in pigeon control is almost entirely educational in nature. They have only filed one charge under this by-law since 2002 and this charge was eventually withdrawn.

In London (England), attempts have been made to control the pigeon population in Trafalgar Square. Pigeon-food-vending businesses were shut down, a falcon was employed to patrol the area and the public feeding of pigeons in the square was banned. It is reported that the pigeon population has now been reduced from 4000 to 1800 birds.

Basel, Switzerland was able to halve its pigeon population over five years from 20,000 to 10,000 by utilizing a combination of a very widespread public relations campaign and dovecotes (providing artificial nesting sites so that fertilized eggs can be replaced with dummies). The public relations campaign discouraged feeding by educating the public that feeding ultimately harms the pigeons through overcrowding.

A New York City councillor is investigating a number of approaches that can be used to control pigeon populations including setting fines for the feeding of pigeons, dovecotes, the use of hawks, pigeon birth control chemicals and the creation of a “pigeon Czar” position responsible for the coordination and

implementation of all pigeon control strategies. At this point, none of these strategies have become official policy of New York City.

## **CONCLUSION**

Existing legislation allows Toronto Public Health to address any health risk posed by pigeons. Jurisdictions that currently control pigeons do so to eliminate the nuisance and property damage pigeons may cause when they gather in large numbers.

## **CONTACT**

Reg Ayre  
Manager, Healthy Environments  
Tel: 416-338-8037  
Fax: 416-338-1643  
E-mail: [rayre@toronto.ca](mailto:rayre@toronto.ca)

Dr. Howard Shapiro  
Associate Medical Officer of Health  
Tel: 416-338-8562  
Fax: 416-338-3418  
E-mail: [hshapir@toronto.ca](mailto:hshapir@toronto.ca)

## **SIGNATURE**

---

Dr. David McKeown  
Medical Officer of Health