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# Paw-friendly? Proposed bill would prevent California landlords from banning pets in rentals

In California's tight rental market, apartment hunting is a daunting task. For pet owners, the options are even fewer.

But a bill proposed in the California State Assembly this year could make it easier for those with furry friends to find a place to rent.

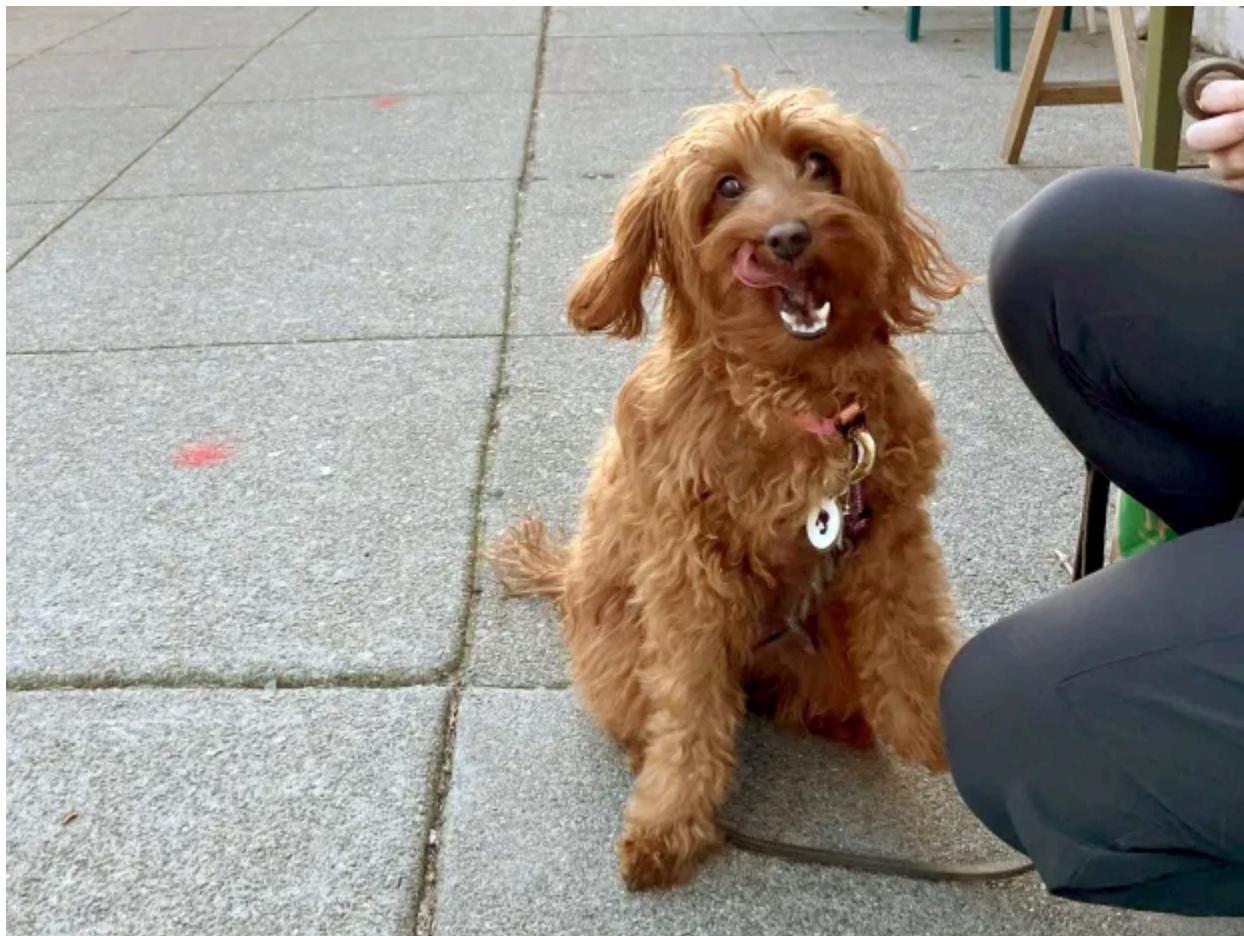
The bill, AB 2216, would prohibit blanket bans of pets in rentals and allow landlords to ask about pet ownership only after a tenant's application has been approved.

"Like it or not, humans have pets, they always have and they always will," Assemblymember Matt Haney, a San Francisco Democrat who proposed the bill, said in a statement. "Blanket 'no companion pet policies' are causing landlords to miss out on good tenants who get rejected without even getting a chance to apply for a place to live. The current system is bad for everyone."

About 57% of households in California own a pet, according to a 2019 survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association. Thousands more adopted pets during COVID. Yet in San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose, just one in five apartments currently on the market allows for large dogs, while about two in five allow for small dogs and cats, according to a review by this news organization of Zillow listings.

In Oakland, Nina Foo, 30, has been searching for six months for a one-bedroom apartment in the Rockridge neighborhood that will accept her mini goldendoodle, Poppy.

"It's been impossible to find something," she said, holding a shaking Poppy — who becomes nervous around strangers — in her arms.



As many reasons as there are to love pets, property owners have plenty of their own for banning them in their buildings. Barking dogs can be a nuisance to neighbors. Unclipped claws can damage wooden floors. Too many cats can leave lingering odors. Owners who don't pick up after their pets' messes create extra work for maintenance staff. Lingering pet dander in carpets can make a unit uninhabitable in the future for someone with severe allergies.

"When you try to mandate sweeping legislation for inclusion of pets in a community, you have to think of the whole of the community — and that includes other renters," said Derek Barnes, executive director of the East Bay Rental Housing Association, which opposes the bill.

The full text of the bill is still in the works, and its chances of becoming law are unclear — but Haney has said landlords would be exempted from the ban if they provide a reason for

excluding pets from their property, such as concerns over health or nuisances, so long as they can provide documentation to a rent board if a tenant pushes back.

Krista Gulbransen, executive director of the Berkeley Property Owners Association, said the ability to ban pets, or certain types of breeds, helps landlords to mitigate their risk — whether that's damage to the unit or potential issues with neighbors.



Kate Witzke the Shelter Behavior and Training manager works with Lola, a one-year-old female dog in the play yard of the East Bay SPCA on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024, in Oakland, Calif. Lola was surrendered to the shelter when the dog's owner moved. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

"While there are plenty of pets that are fine and don't do damage, there are a few that aren't that way," she said. An animal-lover herself, Gulbranson allows pets in most of the units she manages — but it's a decision that has come back to bite her on occasion, such as when she had to rip out new carpeting after a tenant's cat seemed to pee "everywhere but the litter box."

Plus, California law already requires landlords to accept emotional support and service animals without charging an extra fee, she said.

Owners of "companion animals" don't have the same protection, though, and restrictions on pets can push them out of their homes.

That was the case for Tran Nguyen, a 26-year-old software engineer who decided to adopt a cat in 2020. A few months after she and her boyfriend brought Jules, a grey and white Ragdoll kitten, into their Menlo Park apartment, Tran took another look at her lease and spotted a clause that forbade pets. Worried that Jules' loud meowing might tip off their property manager, Tran and her boyfriend decided to break their lease and move so they could keep Jules.



- Roger Yang, left, and Tran Nguyen, right, hold their cats, Jules, 4, and Bisou, 4, at their home in South San Francisco, Calif., on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. (Shae Hammond/Bay Area News Group)

"There was a big fine if we did violate our lease, so we didn't want to deal with that," Nguyen said. They ended up finding an apartment building in San Mateo that allowed cats but charged an additional \$60 per month in pet rent.

In other cases, people wanting to move may decide to stay put rather than brave a housing market unfavorable to pets.

Pali Boucher, who founded Rocket Dog Rescue, has lived in the same apartment in San Francisco for 22 years. The place needs work, and she sometimes wishes her landlord would be more responsive, Boucher said, “but I moved in here because they accepted my pets.”

Along with several birds, she also owns five dogs, including a Doberman and a pit bull mix — two of the most notorious breeds among landlords, as many insurance companies won’t cover a unit where one is living.

Some of the biggest supporters of opening up more rentals to pets are California’s animal shelters, which end up with many of the animals people are forced to give up when they can’t find a home that includes them.

“Housing issues are the number one cited cause of people surrendering their pets to shelters,” said Jill Tucker, CEO of the California Animal Welfare Association. “It’s devastating to the people and to the animal.”



Kate Witzke the Shelter Behavior and Training manager works with Legend, one-year-old husky mix male dog in the play yard of the East Bay SPCA on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024, in Oakland, Calif. Legend's owner was facing homelessness, and wasn't able to find housing that would accept the dog. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

Such animals make up just a portion of the animals at shelters, though — many are stray animals brought in by animal control or found by neighbors. Some families who need to re-home their pets can no longer count on shelters, as many of them have stopped taking "surrendered" animals, citing overcrowding and limited resources, Tucker said.

On Wednesday at the East Bay SPCA Oakland Adoption Center, several dogs abandoned by previous owners were still waiting on a new home, said Karalyn Aronow, the shelter's vice president of operations. They include Lola, a pit bull whose owner had given her up when she moved to a new house, and Legend, a husky-shepherd mix whose owner, facing homelessness, wasn't able to find a rental that would accommodate such a large breed.

"We're hopeful that some sort of bill will be crafted that's going to work out in the best interest of people and their animals, as well as the property owners," Tucker said. "There's got to be a path forward, because something has to give at this point."