



City of Tacoma

City Council Action Memorandum

**TO:** Elizabeth Pauli, City Manager  
**FROM:** Christina Caan, Policy Analyst, City Manager's Office  
Melanie Harding, Assistant to the City Manager, City Manager's Office  
**COPY:** City Council and Council Clerk  
**SUBJECT:** Ordinance to amend Title 17 of the Municipal Code to ban cat declawing – November 28, 2023  
**DATE:** November 21, 2023

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### **SUMMARY AND PURPOSE:**

An ordinance adding a section to Title 17 of the Tacoma Municipal Code establishing a ban on performing a procedure that results in the partial or complete declawing of a cat in the City of Tacoma, except when conducted by a licensed veterinarian for a therapeutic purpose.

### **COUNCIL SPONSORS:**

Council Member John Hines, Council Member Olgy Diaz, and Council Member Sarah Rumbaugh

**Ordinance Request:** This ordinance would add a section to Title 17 of the Tacoma Municipal Code establishing a ban on performing a procedure that results in the partial or complete declawing of a cat in the City of Tacoma, except when conducted by a licensed veterinarian for a therapeutic purpose. "Therapeutic purpose" means a medically necessary procedure to address an existing or recurring infection, disease, injury, or abnormal condition in the claws, nail bed, or toe bone, that jeopardizes the cat's health. "Therapeutic purpose" does not include a procedure performed for a cosmetic or aesthetic purpose or to make the cat more convenient to keep or handle. The ordinance imposes a civil fine of up to \$250, not including any statutory assessments, for the person conducting the declawing in violation of this ordinance in the City of Tacoma. This ordinance will not impact individuals who already own or seek to adopt cats that have previously been declawed. The proposed ordinance would go into effect on March 31, 2024.

### **Background**

Feline onychectomy—more commonly referred to as cat declawing—is a serious medical procedure and major surgery where a cat's third phalanges (toe bones) and claws are surgically removed. Cat claws grow out of the bone, making the surgery to remove the claw similar to amputating a human finger at the last knuckle. Declawing cats is occasionally medically necessary, such as in cases where the cat has a cancerous tumor or has injured its paw so severely that amputation is needed. However, cat owners in Tacoma can currently elect to declaw a cat without a therapeutic reason to prevent the animal from scratching people, other animals, or household items, such as furniture, for the owner's convenience.

Declawing for a non-therapeutic purpose is widely considered by prominent animal protection organizations and veterinary associations to be painful and traumatic for the cat, and the practice is seen as a form of animal cruelty and unnecessary mutilation. Declawing can result in a range of medical problems, including paw pain, back pain, infection, tissue necrosis (tissue death), and lameness. In addition, improperly removed claws can regrow, causing nerve damage and bone spurs. Removing a cat's claws also changes the way a cat's foot meets the ground and can cause additional pain when the animal walks.

- The American Association of Feline Practitioners strongly opposes declawing as an elective procedure, noting there are "inherent risks and complications with declawing that increase with age such as acute



pain, infection, nerve trauma, as well as long term complications like lameness, behavioral problems, and chronic neuropathic pain.”<sup>1</sup> The American Animal Hospital Association, the Humane Society of the United States, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Humane Society for Tacoma & Pierce County all oppose non-therapeutic declawing.<sup>23</sup>

Declawing cats can negatively impact the cat’s personality and emotional well-being, leading many declawed cats to be abandoned by owners, seen as unadoptable, or euthanized. Scratching is part of a cat’s natural behavior and helps to remove dead husks from their nails, add their scent to their surroundings, and stretch. When cats can no longer engage in this natural behavior, many become depressed and grow more aggressive, including increased biting. The Humane Society for Tacoma & Pierce County has noted that they often experience owners surrendering declawed cats to shelter because of the behavioral changes that take place after declawing. If left outside, a declawed cat is largely defenseless against predators.

Today, innovative products are available that can be used as effective, safe, affordable, and humane alternatives, including for ill and immune-compromised individuals. These products include nail trimmers, scratching posts, cat nail covers, and specialized furniture covers/protectors. Trainers and behaviorists can also help cat owners with behavior modification if needed.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not support declawing and notes that ill and immune-compromised individuals can live safely with their companion cats by avoiding rough play and trimming cats’ nails frequently to prevent scratches. Guidelines about living with HIV, jointly produced by the CDC, the National Institutes of Health, and the HIV Medicine Association of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, state “declawing is not advised.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Examples of other cities, states, and countries with declawing bans**

Declawing bans first emerged in the U.S. twenty years ago and since then more than a dozen cities across the nation and two states have adopted bans, with more currently considering legislation. In addition, more than 40 countries worldwide have banned declawing, along with 10 provinces in Canada. In Washington, Tacoma has an opportunity to be the first in the state and lead on this issue.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ CUSTOMER RESEARCH:**

The City Council received public comment from a concerned community member detailing their own negative experiences with declawing and requesting the City put a stop to this outdated and unnecessary form of animal cruelty.

Council Member John Hines has also discussed the issue with the Humane Society for Tacoma & Pierce County, which stresses that declawing cats is not humane and falls into the category of mutilations, similar to docking ears and tails of dogs, which is already illegal in Washington. In addition, Council Member Hines conducted outreach

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<sup>1</sup> [Declawing Position Statement | American Association of Feline Practitioners](#)

<sup>2</sup> [American Animal Hospital Association Declawing](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Position Statement on Declawing Cats | ASPCA](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The Paw Project Position Statement on Cat & Kittens Declawing Procedure](#)



with the Humane Society of the United States, the Paw Project, the Washington State Veterinary Medical Association, and local veterinarians.

Cats are the second most popular pets in the United States, and Washington has one of the country’s highest rates of cat ownership. There are currently around 50,000 household cats living in the City of Tacoma.

If the Ordinance is approved, outreach would include posting the updated code to City websites, publishing a press release, and informing veterinarians in the City of Tacoma of the new ordinance so that they can remain in compliance.

**2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:**

**Equity and Accessibility:** This ordinance is aimed at eliminating a pet procedure in Tacoma that is inhumane in non-therapeutic cases. On complex medical procedures like declawing, low-income pet owners are more likely to receive lower quality pet care that can result in unnecessary declawing or suffering for the animal.

**Civic Engagement:** *Equity Index Score: Moderate Opportunity*  
Increase the percentage of residents who believe they are able to have a positive impact on the community and express trust in the public institutions in Tacoma.

**Livability:** *Equity Index Score: Moderate Opportunity*  
Increase positive public perception of safety and overall quality of life.

This ordinance will show community members who brought forward their concerns regarding cat declawing that their voices are valued by the City Council and have an impact on the community. This ordinance will also ensure that no pet owners receive pet care that is inhumane or creates long-term health and behavioral problems for their pet, increasing the overall quality of life for pet owners.

**ALTERNATIVES:**

Alternative(s)	Positive Impact(s)	Negative Impact(s)
Do not ban cat declawing	Cat owners will maintain the ability to decide if they want to have their cat declawed.	Cats in Tacoma will continue to be subject to this form of animal cruelty.
Increase the penalty for cat declawing to a criminal penalty	A greater penalty may increase the deterrent impact of a declawing ban.	Criminal penalties will be difficult to enforce and raise a risk of equity concerns regarding implementation.

**EVALUATION AND FOLLOW UP:**

If approved, the declawing ban would be published on relevant City websites and shared with community partners like the Humane Society for Tacoma & Pierce County. Tax and Licensing will also notify veterinary businesses in the City of Tacoma. Animal Control will assist in educating the community as part of their standard work.

**STAFF/SPONSOR RECOMMENDATION:**

Sponsors recommend Council pass this ordinance.



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**FISCAL IMPACT:**

Public education of this policy change as outlined under “Community Engagement” above would require minimal City resourcing and community partners have expressed a willingness to assist with public outreach. Enforcement will be managed by existing Animal Control resources and Tacoma Animal Controls Chameleon software.

**Are the expenditures and revenues planned and budgeted in this biennium’s current budget?**

There are no new expenditures planned to support this ordinance and the staff time for implementation is already covered by planned and budgeted resources.

**Are there financial costs or other impacts of not implementing the legislation?**

No

**Will the legislation have an ongoing/recurring fiscal impact?**

No

**Will the legislation change the City’s FTE/personnel counts?**

No

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- Exhibit A