

Animal rights activists, Blaine pet store owner clash as more suburbs ban shops from selling cats or dogs

By Sarah Ritter | Jun. 9th, 2025

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Amy Dixon gets to know Patina through Ruff Start Rescue, a foster-based animal rescue organization that hosted a dog adoption event at Steele & Hops in St. Anthony Village on Sunday. (Richard Tsong-Taatarii/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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A couple of times a month, a group gathers outside Blaine's Northtown Mall to protest one of the last stores in Minnesota that still sells dogs from commercial breeders.

Activists have kept up the demonstrations for more than six years, but they still haven't persuaded the store to change its business model or the city to ban it.

Struggling to gain traction, they're instead turning to neighboring suburbs, where more and more cities now ban pet shops from selling cats or dogs.

That number has doubled over the past year to 12, as officials cite concerns about animal welfare at large-scale breeding operations.

The cities include St. Paul, Minneapolis, Roseville, Columbia Heights, Maple Grove, Coon Rapids and Edina.

Oak Grove and Osseo recently passed pet store ordinances, and Robbinsdale is considering one. The three cities don't have pet stores that sell animals from commercial breeders, but activists hope as more suburbs join in, they can increase pressure on the remaining shops and persuade legislators to pass [a statewide ban](#).

"A lot of these cities have taken action because they want to prevent bad actors from coming in," said Aaron Zellhoefer, Minnesota director of the Humane World for Animals. "Dogs are being sold from puppy mills in pet stores here in Minnesota, and a lot of them don't want to be transparent."

Zellhoefer said just three businesses in the state still sell dogs or cats. Most have closed as online sales rise and other shops, including national chains, have shifted to offering animal adoptions from rescues and shelters.

Michael Swanson, who owns Four Paws and a Tail in Blaine, argued the push for pet retail bans unfairly targets his business, a fixture of the city for 50 years. He said his store's puppies come from breeders licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

“They want us gone, no matter what we do,” Swanson said in an email. “We run our store the right way, and we care about animals and families.”

In many cities, the bans have been an easy sell.

“In Oak Grove, we generally don’t like passing ordinances unless we have to,” Mayor Weston Rolf said. “So I was a little surprised, but the council was passionate about wanting to move forward with this.”



Three dogs get to know each other through Ruff Start Rescue, a foster-based animal rescue organization, at a dog adoption event. (Richard Tsong-Taatarii/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

In 2017, Roseville became the first city in Minnesota to prohibit retail pet sales following news reports describing grim conditions at a pet store in [Har Mar Mall](#).

The shop closed soon after, City Manager Patrick Trudgeon said.

Storefronts with kittens and puppies in the window have since been disappearing. Animal rights activists applaud the shift, citing inhumane practices

at puppy and kitten mills, including over-breeding and keeping animals in confinement.

Sharing stories of customers buying puppies that quickly became sick, activists say retail bans ensure animals and consumers are protected.

Lino Lakes resident Megan Helling said a yellow Labrador she bought from a metro pet store suffered health issues that required \$20,000 in surgeries. The dog, Monte, came from an out-of-state puppy mill, she said.

“I saw this cute little puppy and loved him so much. I was shocked,” Helling said.

“There certainly are reputable breeders. If there’s a certain breed someone wants, that’s great. But there’s a big difference between a small, ethical breeder and the large mass production of puppies. It’s all about profit.”

Eight states and hundreds of cities now ban retail sales of dogs and cats.

Some critics argue that wide-reaching bans can lead to more pet sales moving underground.

“If stores like mine are banned,” Swanson said, “people will just go online and get pets from places with no regulation, no consumer protections, and no taxation.”

The Blaine pet shop owner added that customers deserve an option, especially if seeking out a puppy or specific breed.

Swanson said licensed breeders must follow strict rules. He said every puppy he sells comes with a one-year health guarantee and an examination by a veterinarian.

Activists say state and federal regulations fall short of protecting animals and consumers. They have pushed the USDA to increase its standards.

Zellhoefer said he traced puppies sold at Swanson’s shop and the two others still selling them in Minnesota — in Faribault and Meeker County — to 20 breeders. Since 2021, 17 of the breeders have been cited with about 40 animal welfare violations.

The number could be higher, he said, as Minnesota's inspection reports are not public.

After years of trying to persuade Minnesota lawmakers to advance a statewide pet retail ban, activists pushed for a compromise this session.

The proposal, which did not move forward, grandfathered in existing businesses, while requiring more transparency, including labeling where animals came from before they are purchased.

Swanson opposed the bill, saying it would kill his business because he would be unable to relocate if needed.

He said his shop tells customers about a puppy's breeder when they buy the animal. Posting that information, he said, could lead to the breeders being harassed.

Activists hold onto hope for a statewide change.

"We get calls from people with animals from large-scale breeders that have health issues and can't afford care," said Azure Davis, founder of Ruff Start Rescue, which holds adoption events at PetSmart. "I think [the bans] are long overdue."

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