

Doggie dining

■ *Bills would allow citizens to dine out with their dog*

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When dining out for dinner, who always seems to be missing? The lonely four-legged friend at home.

Bills proposed in the House and Senate are aiming to change this. Dogs would be allowed to dine with their owners at restaurants with outdoor patios.

As a pet owner, Sen. Margaret O'Brien, R-Portage, who re-introduced the bill in the Senate, said she understands the desire to spend time with your dog after working all day.

She also said there are people who like to travel in Michigan with their pets, but find it difficult when it comes time for a meal.

"We have hotels that allow dogs and dog parks, but if you want to experience any type of dining, you really can't," O'Brien said. "The fact that their pet can't come is changing their experience."

The legislation would allow customers who are at least 18 years old to eat with their dogs, as long as the animals are on a leash. The dog would not be allowed on a chair, table or customer's lap.

To participate, restaurants would first have to notify their local health department. They would also be required to have a separate entrance to the outdoor seating area, so the dog would not enter the restaurant.

Staff would have to clean up waste at least once daily, and employees who touch a dog would have to immediately wash their hands.

Some restaurateurs across the state are thrilled at the possibility of customers dining with their dogs.

Marilyn Cunic, owner of the Blu Moon, a French/Japanese fusion bistro in Ludington, said her business is staffed with many dog advocates. She said legislation should allow dogs on outdoor patios.

"Ludington is a real dog-loving community," Cunic said. "I think our customers would really support this choice."

For customers who may find dining with dogs off-putting, Cunic said Blu Moon's upstairs patio would remain dog-free. This way, she said, there would be a space for everyone.

Some local restaurants already call themselves "pet-friendly" — and therefore support the proposal — though the state technically bans dogs at all restaurants. One such restaurant is J & S Hamburg, a burger joint in Traverse City.

"We have dogs (on the patio) all the time," said assistant manager Jennifer Coty. "We have dogs' water bowls and everything. We love it."

Other restaurateurs, like Mike Karas, owner of Salt & Pepper Savory Grill and Pub in Holland, remain skeptical of allowing dogs at their businesses.

"We are all huge animal lovers, and we all have pets," Karas said. "But we are just going to stay with allowing service dogs."

Karas said his major concern would be keeping up with the pets' waste, and the possibility of dogs not getting along. Some guests could get hurt, he said, if customers' dogs get into fights.

"You're going to offend someone," he said. "So we are just trying

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to do what's best for the highest number of people."

O'Brien said the legislation would not be a mandate, so restaurateurs like Karas's could deny entry to customers with dogs or regulate the breed of dog allowed on patios. She said a city or township could also choose to opt out altogether by passing a city or township ordinance.

O'Brien introduced the same bill last year. It passed

in the Senate but stalled in the House. This year, Rep. Pamela Hornberger, R-Chesterfield Township, and two other Republicans are co-sponsoring the bill in the House.

The Senate bill was referred to the Committee on Agriculture. The House bill was referred to the Committee on Regulatory Reform.

Committee chairs could not be reached for comment.