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Arizona to Florida to Oklahoma have approved ordinances.

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Eggs priced at \$12.29 per dozen at a convenience store in Oklahoma, Feb. 7, 2023. Credit: Isaac M. O'Bannon, CPA Practice Advisor.

By Alex Brown, Stateline.org (TNS).

For five years, a woman known as the Chicken Lady of South Jersey urged local officials in Haddon Township, New Jersey, to allow her and other residents to keep

chickens in their backyards. She eventually won them over — but that was just the

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and provide great fertilizer for the garden. People in the chicken movement want to have some control over their food supply.”

In recent months, backyard chicken advocates like Baile have been winning victories around the country. Prompted in part by the sky-high price of supermarket eggs, city councils from Arizona to Florida to Oklahoma have approved ordinances allowing people to welcome hens into their yards, and one legislature, Texas, is even considering a statewide law.

“There’s much more interest in backyard flocks, and it’s related to the fact that egg prices have gone way up, and eggs are really scarce,” said Richard Blatchford, a poultry specialist at the University of California, Davis Department of Animal Science.

Backyard chicken advocates also may want to have a connection with the food they eat, provide an educational experience for kids or even keep therapy chickens for their emotional benefits.

The average price of a dozen eggs rose from \$1.79 in December 2021 to \$4.25 at the end of last year, according to Federal Reserve Economic Data figures. Cost increases have been driven by inflation and an avian flu outbreak that led to the death and culling of millions of chickens.

“As egg prices have gone up, a number of residents have said this is something they’d like to see to address costs at the grocery store as well as being more food independent,” said Tim Maday, community development director for the city of Zeeland, Michigan, where officials are considering an ordinance that would allow residents to keep up to four chickens.

But experts caution that aspiring chicken owners who are motivated solely by egg prices are in for a reality check.

“You’ll never be able to produce eggs cheaper than the store,” said University of

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Poultry experts said the rise of backyard chicken laws has allowed residents to raise poultry in a way communities largely have supported, and there are many good reasons for cities to pursue similar ordinances.

Many municipal chicken laws allow residents to keep four to eight hens, often prohibiting roosters due to noise concerns. They set parameters for the size of coops and enclosures, require setbacks from property lines and nearby buildings and include provisions about the management of waste.

Baile (the Chicken Lady) said many of the ordinances she’s helped pass are successful because they require residents to take a three-hour class before receiving a permit. That has helped chicken owners manage their flocks responsibly and helped address neighbors’ concerns. City leaders who have adopted such laws said they’ve received more support than pushback for backyard chicken proposals, and concerns often fade once the programs are underway. Compliance issues, backers said, are usually minimal and easily corrected.

“It just seemed only right that we were allowing residents that ability to have chickens if so desired,” said Lauren Schumann, principal planner for the city of Chandler, Arizona, which approved a chicken ordinance in December. “In conversations that I had with neighboring cities’ code enforcement officers, they said they didn’t have a big problem with chickens. We haven’t been advised of any chickens overrunning a neighborhood as of yet.”

Council members in Inverness, Florida, voted in December to allow up to four hens on single-family lots in the city. Residents must obtain a permit, along with a 15-page guide to caring for chickens and pass an initial inspection.

“People wanted that opportunity to live a more healthy and sustainable lifestyle,” said Greg Rice, the city’s community development director. “Some thought it was a

good thing if there was a natural disaster or power outage, they'd still have a portion

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"This provides a good framework to help families provide for themselves and have fresh vegetables and fresh eggs in the home on a regular basis," Cortez said. "The political will might be there this legislative session because of the economic factors we're seeing."

Not just chicken feed

But residents should be warned that the costs of a coop and chicken feed will far outweigh the price of eggs at the grocery store, poultry experts say.

Jacob, the University Kentucky poultry specialist, noted that hens can live for 10 years but only lay eggs productively for two or three.

"You have to be willing to eat them or be willing to pay to feed them when they're not laying," she said. "Most people do not want to kill their own chickens, but they'll abandon them."

She said some communities and animal shelters have seen an increase in abandoned chickens after allowing for backyard animals. Blatchford, the UC Davis specialist, said it also can be difficult to find veterinarians who can care for chickens. He noted that improper handling of hens can spread salmonella and bacteria. All those factors, the experts said, show the importance of education and oversight for cities looking to allow chickens.

"Overall, it's positive," Blatchford said. "People get into backyard chickens because they want some control over their own food supply, and the birds really become part of their family and people really enjoy having them. But there's definitely a segment of people who get backyard chickens and don't realize the amount of work it takes or just decide they really don't like it."

In Zeeland, Michigan, where city officials are likely to decide on a chicken ordinance

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