

City Looks to Target Animal Buyers in Effort to Stop Sales

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Cages containing rabbits and turtles sit in the sun near 11th and Maple in August of 2009.

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES — A new ordinance designed to give law enforcement another tool in the fight against illegal animal sales on Los Angeles streets took a step forward this week, but it remains to be seen if it will have any effect on a problem that numerous raids and frequent arrests have done little to impact.

On any given day, shoppers along Maple in the Fashion District can find street vendors selling small turtles no larger than a quarter and baby rabbits that could fit in the palm of your hand. “Downtown could easily be Bangladesh,” says Lejla Hadzimuratovic, who has lived all over the world and witnessed similar scenes in third-world countries.

Hadzimuratovic created the [Bunny World Foundation](#) to rescue the baby rabbits sold illegally near Santee Alley in 2008. She said the problem is that the animals are too young to survive and 90 percent of them die soon after being purchased.

“The animals are taken away from their mothers before they’re really old enough. They’re not resistant to disease, so they get taken home and they die,” says Linda Barth, Assistant General Manager, Los Angeles Animal Services. According to Barth, some rabbits are sold at just one week old, long before the 12 to 16 weeks of weaning a healthy rabbit would need to survive and flourish.

Sellers claim that the rabbits are old enough to eat solid vegetables. Instead, consumers take rabbits home to find them struck with seizures from the lack of mother’s milk, says Hadzimuratovic.

On Monday, the City Council’s Public Safety committee approved the concept of an ordinance that [would make it a misdemeanor for consumers to purchase these animals off the street](#). In addition, Los Angeles Animal Services is seeking approval and funding to post signs alerting the public that street sales of animals are illegal.

Currently, the law simply holds vendors accountable who “display, sell, offer for sale, barter or give away, upon any street or sidewalk, or other public place in the City of Los Angeles, any rabbits, baby chicks, ducklings or other fowl, as pets or novelties, whether or not dyed, colored or otherwise artificially treated.” The law also states that rabbits less than four weeks of age cannot be sold or given away.

Enforcing the law is another issue. During a brief visit this past Sunday, street vendors were out selling bunnies in small cages for \$20 each and water turtles for \$8. Just before district security rolled up, one illegal vendor quickly tossed the turtles into a trash bag and walked off with the cages. Minutes later, the same woman was seen selling the animals fifty yards away.

The scene repeats itself daily.

Randall Tampa, operations director for the [Fashion District Business Improvement District \(BID\)](#), says that the various illegal vendors communicate with each other using walkie talkies,

warning each other when security or police are in the area. He says that in addition to regular arrests of illegal vendors by the LAPD, the BID distributes fliers periodically to alert shoppers of the illicit nature of street vendors selling animals.

Along with bootleg DVD sellers and unlicensed food carts, he says illegal pet sales “detract from what we’re trying to do with the district. It detracts from the name and image we’re trying to portray.”

As blogdowntown [reported last year](#), a raid of illegal animal sellers around Santee Valley resulted in ten felony arrests with bail of \$20,000 set for the accused. However, due to Los Angeles prison overcrowding, those with bail of less than \$25,000 [were released on their own recognizance](#).

Bunny World’s Hadzimuratovic says that her organization has taken in one thousand bunnies since it started, and continues to receive new rabbits twice a week. While she appreciates the effort and attention to addressing the issue of illegal bunny sales, she is skeptical additional laws will reduce the practice. “Do we expect those folks to follow the law or read the signs?” she asks. “The LAPD is extraordinary in arresting them but the Sheriff’s Department keeps releasing them.”

Hadzimuratovic would like to see a full time full-time security guard dedicated to fending off pet dealers.

Monday’s action is just one in a number of steps that the proposed ordinance must take before it becomes law, something that likely would take several months.

In the meantime, Linda Barth with Animal Services says those involved have to keep trying with the resources they currently have. “Our concern is a two-fold one,” she says. “The animals are suffering. They’re being bred for the purpose to be sold off. We are also concerned for people who are buying these animals and don’t know how to take care of them.”