

Pet owners lash out at alleged abuser

Teenager confronted before court appearance on animal cruelty charges

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DIDSBURY

With CanadianPress file

Didsbury RCMP will have a stronger presence the next time an alleged dog abuser appears in court following a large and vocal protest by animal lovers outraged and disgusted by the high-profile case.

An estimated 60 pet advocates turned out for the brief hearing Monday - most bringing their dogs - and afterwards, blocked a minivan attempting to whisk 19-year-old Daniel Charles Haskett away from the Didsbury courthouse.

Others pounded their fists on the van's windows and hood, while a group kicked its sides and back door.

"Loser," yelled one group of women, while a man screamed, "Dog killer."

Some protesters blasted Haskett with profanity.

A small group of teens who showed up to support Haskett were also challenged by protesters. "We are here to support my friend," said one unnamed teen, clearly frustrated by the attention. "We're not here to defend him."

Haskett's lawyer, who was not in court, said the public needs to hear both sides of the case before they pass judgment.

"I don't blame people for being upset, but they haven't heard the whole story," said Calgary-based defender Mark Takada. "There's two sides to the story and nobody knows but his family and me."

Takada is still waiting for full disclosure from the Crown prosecutor's office before determining his next move.

Well-known Calgary prosecutor Gordon Haight has been assigned the case.

Haskett and his 17-year-old co-accused face a number of animal cruelty charges, including injuring or endangering an animal and causing unnecessary suffering.

A border collie-lab cross named Daisy Duke had to be euthanized on a street after it was found bleeding and suffering Oct. 8. It is believed she had been beaten and possibly dragged behind a vehicle.

The dog's legs were bound with duct tape and there was a tow rope around its neck. Its head was wrapped in a bag.

A veterinarian called to the scene said the rope around the dog's neck was so tight it caused one of her eyes to pop out. Her neck, back and pelvis were also broken. The vet destroyed the dog immediately.

Haskett is expected to return to Didsbury court Nov. 22 to enter a plea. His co-accused, who can't be named under provisions of the Young Offenders Act, is scheduled to next appear in court Dec. 7.

Crowds of protesters holding signs began to gather in front of the tiny courthouse more than an hour before the scheduled hearing. Some had come from as far away as Lethbridge to the south, and Edmonton to the north.

"Send him to jail and let the inmates deal with him," said Shelley Craig, a local resident who brought along her cocker spaniel, Snickers.

Heather Hicks held her pint-sized chihuahua up to Haskett's windshield and asked: "Would you kill this, too?"

Melissa Coderre, who drove from Calgary with her dog Cube, said she felt compelled to show her support for toughening Canada's animal cruelty laws.

Cube was rescued after being abused by her owner. The pooch lost his left eye after being kicked in the face for defecating in the house.

Coderre said animals need to be recognized as persons under the law to receive full protection from abuse.

Kim McDonald drove three hours from Edmonton to join the group in protest.

"We needed to join forces and show that there's a real need for Bill C-50," said McDonald, a representative with Voice for Animals.

Just days after the attack, Didsbury resident Tamara Chaney started a petition imploring the federal government to resurrect Bill C-50 - a law that would introduce a new offence of "killing an animal brutally or viciously, whether or not it dies immediately."

Only Chaney's four-page petition will be taken to the House of Commons by Tory MP Myron Thompson.

The allegations have prompted strong reaction across Alberta.

One Didsbury resident started a petition on the Internet, and the RCMP warned against taking vigilante action after a man was arrested for leaving a threatening message on the Haskett answering machine.

"We've received hundreds, maybe thousands, of messages from people who are just outraged at the reports," said Tim Battle with the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.