

Edition: St. Paul

Section: MAIN

Page: A1

Source: BY ALEX FRIEDRICH

Pioneer Press

SENATE DEBATES PROTECTIONS FOR SUBURBAN GUN CLUBS

A clash of cultures -- rugged gun club vs. suburban homeowner -- has intensified around the rural stretches of the Twin Cities in recent years, and Wednesday it landed at the state Capitol.

As the population of the Twin Cities continues to spread, gun clubs often find themselves surrounded by angry neighbors.

In a late-session hearing, a Senate judiciary committee discussed a contentious piece of legislation that would protect shooting ranges and preserves from the demands of neighbors, who have long objected to the noise and activity. In return, the clubs would be subject to a few new restrictions and noise monitoring.

Though residents decried what they saw as the bill's weak restrictions on clubs, legislators said it's the best deal they've been able to strike in years. The bill now goes to the Senate floor.

In question is who -- the city or the state -- decides how Minnesota's estimated 320 gun clubs and their neighbors will get along. Homeowners want to battle it out in city council meetings, where they say they can press for local solutions to their problems. But gun clubs have been pushing for statewide standards to regulate the ranges -- and yet keep residents off their backs.

It's a struggle that has frustrated a number of legislators, and led Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville, to say, "There's no good way out."

An example discussed Wednesday was the Bald Eagle Sportsman's Association, an 80-acre site with pistol, shotgun and rifle ranges that has been at its spot in Hugo since 1957. The 350-member club recently installed night lighting and reintroduced muzzle-loaded weapons, which neighbors say make more noise than conventional weapons.

About a half-dozen residents described life near the range as a nightmare of noise. Children can't study, nerves are frayed and residents must leave the area for quiet, they said.

"When they have (shooting) meets, it's unbearable," said Grace Axelson, 69, who has lived within 100 yards of the gun club for 48 years. Gunshots "even scare the cattle."

The bill, authored by Sen. Satveer Chaudhary, DFL-Fridley, would essentially give the gun clubs much of what they want. The commissioner of natural resources would create operating standards, relying on a National Rifle Association guidebook in the interim. The standards would, among other things, create maximum noise levels.

But in a move that upset some Hugo residents, it proposed allowing gun clubs to operate between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. And it effectively created a 750-foot buffer zone between ranges and local homeowners. Owners who live within that zone could not develop property if it caused the club to violate noise or other restrictions -- unless the

owners paid for the changes needed to bring the club into compliance.

"People aren't going to be able to develop their property," said Melinda Lopes of Hugo, who has lived near a club for the past few years. "What happened to their land rights?"

Already, one potential homebuyer was scared away after reading Internet complaints about the gun club, Lopes said. She and her neighbors told senators they fear the club could drive down property values.

The residents complained the noise standards were too weak, and the methodology of testing was questionable.

Yet range owners said before the hearing they thought homeowners were overreacting..

Clubs have been working to be good neighbors, club owners said, but some residents are determined to drive gun clubs out of town. As of 2002, 16 metro-area clubs had reported having "serious problems" staying in business because of unreasonable neighborhood reaction, he said, and three were shut down entirely. There are about 30 gun clubs in the metro area.

"Our aim is to maintain good neighbor policies," said Les Bensch, an Ashby hunt club owner and proponent of the bill. "But we need to be able to stay in business."

A major amendment to the bill Wednesday forces clubs to honor restrictions -- such as limited hours of operation -- they already in force under permits with their cities.

Compared to past attempts at legislation, some attending the hearing called it a decent balance. Not great, but acceptable.

The Senate must now consider taking up the amendments, and the committee members said they hope their more restrictive version of the bill is taken on in the final legislation agreed on by the House and Senate.

Alex Friedrich can be reached at afriedrich@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-2109.