

Volunteers howl over Placer animal shelters

By Niesha Lofing — Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PST Wednesday, November 9, 2005

Story appeared in Metro section, Page B1

The Placer County animal shelter in Auburn is outdated, services are inefficient, and bureaucratic red tape is hampering its ability to provide proper animal services, members of a shelter volunteer group told county supervisors Tuesday.

Friends of Placer County Animal Shelters, a volunteer group of more than 300 who advocate safety for animals and residents, has launched a campaign to change the operation of Placer County Animal Services and build a new shelter, solutions county officials have agreed to explore.

"The shelter is little more than a holding facility for animals," Rosemary Frieborn, president of the group, told supervisors.

The county's Auburn shelter and another in Tahoe Vista are operating at full capacity, taking in up to 7,000 animals a year, a county official said.

The volunteer group has focused its attention on the Auburn shelter, the larger of the two.

Supervisors Robert Weygandt and Jim Holmes agreed improvements are needed. "We need to create a better level of service," Weygandt said earlier.

The volunteer group also is advocating Animal Services managers report directly to the county executive's office. They currently answer to Health and Human Services Department officials, adding layers of middle management that "hampers our ability to provide services," Frieborn said.

A high turnover in Animal Services managers in recent years - six since 1999 - also has stalled improvement efforts, the group contends.

County Executive Officer Tom Miller promised to examine the group's concerns and recommended forming a committee to study problems and find potential solutions. A similar ad hoc shelter panel was set up in 2002.

But he declined to give a specific timeline for having Animal Services report to his office.

Animal Services has been the subject of scrutiny for years, with three studies since 1999. Two recommended a new shelter in Auburn and all three, an accurate, up-to-date computer system to track animals.



Members of Friends of the Placer County Animal Shelters, including Terry Lutz, center, and Bette Cook, right, leave Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting after demanding an upgrade of Auburn's shelter.

Sacramento Bee/Bryan Patrick

Without an accurate tracking program, the shelters can't adequately gauge what to charge cities that contract with the county for services, officials said.

The 2000-2001 grand jury's recommendations ranged from upgrading the computer system to making a larger shelter a priority.

Frieborn contends the recommendations have gone unfulfilled for too long.

"It's time for the county to show that they're a player with us," she said earlier. "They need to show us that they're a partner and restructure the organization so this can move forward."

Rosemary Roberts, a member of Friends, said she is tired of the shelter's inadequacies and promises from county officials who don't follow through.

"The county government is wasting taxpayer money," she said. "We can't allow unacceptable oversight and the continued neglect by the Board of Supervisors. ... As a taxpaying member of this county, it is no longer acceptable to me, and it's time to say 'enough.'"

Mike Winters, program manager for Animal Services, said many of their concerns are valid.

Winters, who has been on the job only two months and previously led the Sacramento SPCA for 20 years, said he ranked the recommendations in the latest study and has begun to implement changes.

Among the many recommendations in the latest study, released in late September, were improvements to the shelter facilities, such as segregating potentially dangerous or quarantined animals at the Tahoe Vista shelter, hiring more staff and purchasing a new computer system.

Some have been done, Winters said. A new kennel manager has been hired, and a \$40,000 computer program has been ordered that is hoped to be in place in six to nine months, he said.

Friends of Placer County Animal Shelter members said the study is flawed, however, because it does not recommend a new Auburn shelter.

Winters said that while there is a need to expand animal shelter operations, he isn't certain there is sufficient demand for a shelter.

About the writer:

The Bee's Niesha Lofing can be reached at (916) 773-6846 or nlofing@sacbee.com.