

The STANDARD BANNER

Commissioners Wade In on Animal Shelter Funding cuts may be only leverage that county has

By Steve Marion, Staff Writer | January 9, 2018

County Commissioners are probing the turmoil at the local animal shelter, but without a formal operating agreement their only option for action may be a funding cut.

Members of Commission's animal control board spent a couple of hours Friday sorting through a situation which has led three Humane Society board members and four shelter employees to quit. They also looked at a Humane Society board decision to move temporarily to "as space allows" acceptance of homeless animals despite a one-time \$30,000 contribution from Commission designed to keep the shelter running as usual. Add to all this a controversial dog bite incident at the shelter that an employee's parents say left him with potential nerve damage.

The issue was expected to reach Commission's budget committee yesterday evening. County Commissioner John McGraw, a member of both the animal control board and the budget committee, said Friday that he sees control of finances as the only leverage the group has on the issue. He encouraged the Humane Society board to "bury the hatchet" with former manager Kris Spencer, whose "services are needed at the shelter."

Katherine Noyes, a founding member of the local Humane Society and a member of the animal control board, proposed that Human Society president Scott Lubas rehire the four employees and invite the three departed board members back "and try it for six months — see if we can work on this as a team."

Lubas didn't respond to her proposal. He contends that the board's decision to stop admissions has been "misread." The shelter has not turned away any animals brought in by animal control officers — and overall only two animals, a pig and a cat, have not been accepted since the "as space is available" decision was made December 27, he said.

"We are working on a solution to the circumstances," Lubas told the board. "We're doing the best we can with what we have."

Two former shelter employees, however, said after the meeting that several animals were actually turned away in the immediate aftermath of the decision. Six animals were turned away on December 27 and perhaps three after that, said Pascal Robin and Ashley Foster, both of whom resigned on December 28. Robin said she later learned that one dog that was turned away was simply "turned loose" in the Morristown area by his owner.

Former Humane Society president Jeanne Ringe told the board she resigned last summer "after a year and a half of receiving increasing hostility and verbal abuse from Scott Lubas and lackluster support from most of the other board members." The shelter, she said, is "no longer functioning as a compassionate resource for all animals in need and for the first time is no longer an open admissions shelter."

Commission itself is partly to blame for the situation, she said.

"I tried repeatedly to get formal recognition from the county and either a memorandum of understanding or memorandum of agreement or some contractual agreement specifying what services would be provided for the county and the compensation for those services," Ringe said. "I believe the situation would not have reached this crisis point — and I do believe there is a crisis — if the county commission had supported a formal agreement."

The county budget includes \$70,000 for shelter operations, about half of what Lubas says it actually costs to run the facility. Last year, Commissioners authorized an additional \$30,000 with the understanding — as outlined in an October 31 letter from County Finance Director Langdon Potts to Lubas — that the funds would insure continued operation of the shelter through the end of the fiscal year on June 30.

A shelter volunteer, the former employees, and Lubas all had input during the board meeting about a severe dog bite that occurred at the shelter December 6. Lubas contends that policies were not followed leading up to the attack, but Robin said workers were told only that the dog was “food aggressive,” not aggressive in other ways.

Shelter volunteer Bruce Dalgleish reported that the dog attack on his son Alex, who was working at the shelter and attempting to vaccinate the German Shepherd at the time, was “preventable.” In an email to Lubas, he states that Alex was bitten at least six times, and he told the board Friday that the victim has nerve damage that could be permanent.

Dalgleish said he understands that the animal control officer who brought the dog in told shelter staff that it was aggressive, but Robin said her understanding was that it was “food aggressive.” Spencer was off from work the day of the attack.

“[Alex] didn’t know the dog was aggressive,” Lubas said, adding that “other employees did know. There was a breakdown in communications apparently.”

The dog was euthanized December 27, after it tried to attack a dog behavior specialist who had been asked to examine it by a law enforcement officer interested in adoption, Lubas said.

The board’s decision to temporarily stop open intake at the shelter was based on short-staffing and impending frigid weather, Lubas said. He said all board members voted in favor.

“My concern is — I don’t want to see this program be selective,” said Noyes. “I want to see open admissions and kind euthanasia.”

If the board continues to vote otherwise, she will consider filing legal action, she said.

In her comments to the board, Spencer pointed out that she maintained a spotless record during seven and a half years of employment at the shelter. She received an honorary resolution from County Commission last year. She said, however, that she disagreed with impending policy changes made after Lubas became president. She said she left short of her two-week notice on December 15 because Lubas was disrespectful to her.

Spencer said Lubas “threatened” to hire someone else to do aspects of her job and that of other shelter workers unless they “stepped up” to his standards. She said she was informed that she was failing to insure a safe work place and was not performing the duties in her job description.

The animal control board meets again February 9 at 10 a.m.

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