

PROPOSED PET ORDINANCE STILL STIRRING CONTROVERSY

by Joel Moreno

The Santa Cruz County Administrative Office hoped to quiet dissension over a proposed county ordinance with a new approach to a proposed pet population-control law, but veterinarians and professional breeders are less enthused with the plan to curb unwanted pets than before the process started.

In an attempt to simplify a somewhat complicated and controversial ordinance, the County's top administrator, Susan Mauriello, suggested the requirement for a breeder licensing system be replaced by a flat \$10 fee for any dog or cat that is not spayed or neutered. Also discussed were options in creating a free or low-cost spay and neuter program, relying on local veterinarians and clinics to spearhead the effort.

Members of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), which submitted the original proposal, lauded the changes as creating a simple, workable solution to the overbreeding problem.

"I'm happy with the proposal," said Marilee Geyer, a spokesperson for the SPCA.

Geyer said the CAO came up with a much more accessible version that still addresses everyone's concerns. Either pet owners spay and neuter their animals or they obtain an unaltered animal permit, which cuts out the loopholes present in the original draft.

However, detractors pointed to numerous additions in the revamped ordinance that made little sense to them.

"It's the writing of it that's the problem," said Lynn Schmitt, spokesperson for the Animal Issues Alliance, a professional breeders group.

Schmitt said that she believed some of the measures called for by the proposed ordinance would not stand a legal test.

"There are certain provisions written into the ordinance which are illegal," Schmitt said.

"If you are going to write an ordinance, do it in a way that you won't always be hauled off to court."

Schmitt alluded to detailed vaccination requirements which aren't necessarily healthy for all cats and dogs, unclear wording on the exemption for breeders, and unrealistic and financially burdensome expectations from those who feed feral cats.

The original ordinance was a response to runaway breeding of dogs and cats in the county that lead SPCA workers to exterminate 4300 animals in 1992. SPCA directors contended that not only was this practice expensive for the taxpayers, but was an unethical solution that did not address the real culprit - irresponsible dog and cat owners.

The SPCA proposal sought to invoke mandatory spaying and neutering of all dogs and cats over the age of six months. Otherwise, a special breeding permit could be obtained for a cost to keep the animal reproductively unaltered.

The SPCA proposal came before the County Board of Supervisors at a February 1 public hearing, but concerns by such groups as the National Pet Alliance, the Farm Bureau and the Santa Cruz Veterinarians Association prompted the Board to call for mediation between the divergent groups.

Mauriello, the county's administrative officer, was asked to direct the proceedings. However, the proposal Mauriello came back with wasn't as palatable as these groups had hoped.

Dr. Naomi Kirschenbaum, a veterinarian with the Aptos Animal Hospital, said she was "frustrated" with the county office in how they have tried to set public policy. When contacted by the Post, she said she had "only just received" the Mauriello proposal and had found many technical problems with it.

"I don't understand how they keep submitting things to be considered that haven't been edited in a final fashion,"

Kirschenbaum said.

What really fueled the ire of the AIA was when Board of Supervisors Chairman Gary Patton gave Mauriello his own ordinance proposal for review, and she took some of the things he said and incorporated it into the draft plan.

"Here you have somebody who knows nothing about animal husbandry writing an ordinance," Schmitt said.

Mauriello said what went into the ordinance was the result of discussions that took place between the designated participants since the February 1 public hearing. She said a number of changes went into the ordinance, but because the major parties concerned didn't have enough time to respond to the changes, she asked the Board Members to only give the matter "cognitive consideration," and urged the supervisors to render final decision on March 22.

The other area Mauriello was to explore, the development of a community-based program to provide for low cost spay and neutering, is equally contentious.

Veterinarians claim that although these procedures are routine, they are still surgical operations, and as such they are not inexpensive to do. Many veterinarians are charging at-cost for these services already and are relying on fees from other procedures to support much of their overall operations.

"Veterinarians are just not in a position to subsidize it further," said Kirschenbaum. "You can't do it for a loss or you can't keep your doors open."

Kirschenbaum said if the county wants to develop more low-fee programs a source of funding has to be identified. Kirschenbaum said the average charge for neutering a cat is \$35; spaying is closer to \$50. Dogs are somewhat more expensive, she said, because the anaesthetic protocols are more expensive to administer and monitor. □