

# County, SPCA scrap over shelter budget



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

The amount of money needed for services at the SPCA shelter in Mid-County is a bone of contention.

## County says approval of budget an impossibility

By JEANENE HARLICK  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

County supervisors butted heads with the SPCA, their staff and each other in a three-hour tussle that left them no closer to figuring out how animal-shelter services will be provided come July 1.

While supervisors Jeff Almquist and Tony Campos grilled the SPCA about accounting practices and providing hip replacements to animals, supervisors Jan Beautz and Mardi Wormhoudt tried to hold their colleagues at bay in the hopes that compromise can still be reached.

"This is just a horrible hearing, it really is, because it's so adversarial," Wormhoudt said. "We all are working for the same goal here. We're going to have to put aside some of our

personal differences."

Supervisor Ellen Pirie was absent due to a family death.

At issue was finding a midpoint between the SPCA's \$1.6 million budget request and the county's \$750,000 cap for shelter services. The SPCA also owes the county more than \$200,000 in fines and fees it says it accidentally spent due to poor accounting practices. The SPCA's contract with the county ends June 30.

The SPCA says there's no way it can continue to provide the same level of services for less than \$1.6 million.

"To do this contract anywhere near (\$750,000) means we cannot pay staff even close to a living wage, we cannot meet our standards of animal care and — let's not forget, quite dramatically — it means more animals will die," said Doreen



Purr-ll is one of the animals waiting at the shelter to find a home.

Lozano, SPCA interim executive director.

But the county says decreased tax revenue and state budget cuts make it impossible to approve more than \$750,000. A proposed 2002-03 budget released Tuesday forecasts a \$38 mil-

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lion drop in revenue from last year. Departments have been directed to cut budgets by at least 12 percent across the board. Budget hearings begin June 17, and the new fiscal year starts July 1.

"You have to get real about where we are," Almquist said. "Your demands continue to be outlandish. ... I hope my attitude will help you to get more real fast."

In the latest round of proposals and counter-proposals, the County Administrator's Office suggested public operation of the SPCA's shelter.

The county would lease and staff the facility, providing the minimum animal-care and shelter services required by law. That amounts to a five-day holding period for most animals.

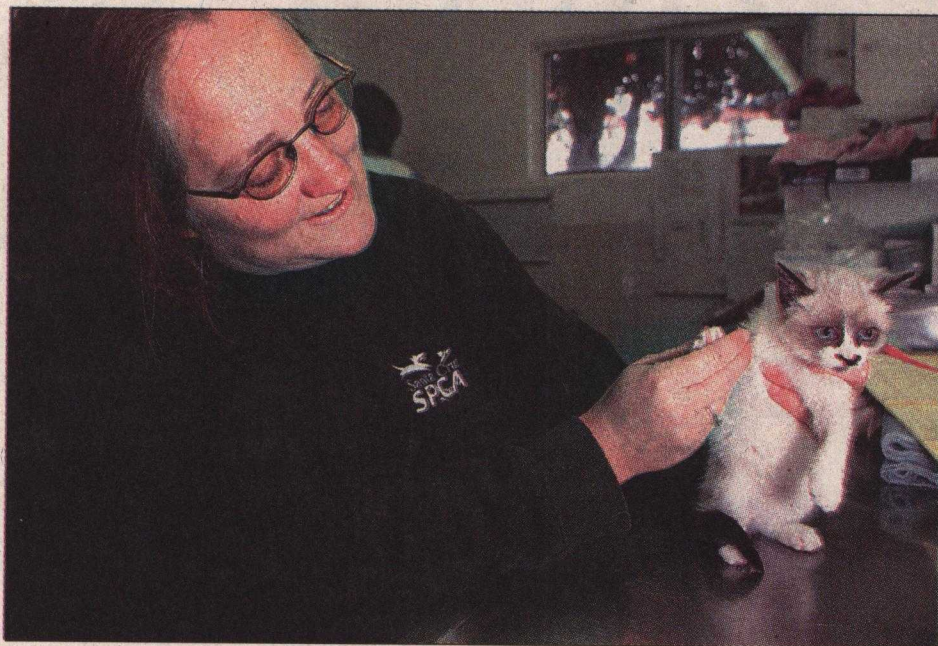
The SPCA could continue to provide adoption and shelter services beyond the mandatory hold period with money raised through private donations.

The county's contract with the agency now allows animals to be held up to 30 days. The average period before adoption is 16 days, according to the SPCA. The agency says 72 percent of its animals are adopted and that it has one of the lowest euthanization rates in the nation.

The county estimates it could meet state shelter mandates for \$760,000, compared to the SPCA's \$1.6 million. But Lozano said the SPCA couldn't continue to shelter animals beyond five days unless money is provided.

"As a result (of this proposal), the euthanasia rate would skyrocket," Lozano said. "The supervisors have stated that they do not want to revert to the 'city pound' model. What is being proposed is a 'city pound' model."

About 20 animal activists also turned out Tuesday to oppose the county's plan and demand more funding for the SPCA.



Kim Archuleta gives a kitten a checkup at the SPCA on Tuesday.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Supervisors couldn't discuss the shelter proposal Tuesday because it was the first they'd heard of it.

Beautz spoke harshly to county staff, saying the board must see any future offers before they're presented to the SPCA. "The board needs to be kept apprised of what's going on here," she said.

Beautz said neither county staff nor the SPCA has provided the board with line-item budgets detailing the cost of various services.

"In order to see if there's a way to work this out, we need more specific budget information," she said after the meeting.

Beautz suggested several cost-saving measures, including reducing hold periods to 15 days, charging clients full cost for spays or neuters, and reducing shelter hours by one or two days.

But Almquist and Campos appeared unwilling to compromise Tuesday, with Almquist favoring public operation of the SPCA's shelter. Almquist estimated the agency spends \$550 per animal per month — a cost that rivals

what most county residents pay for child care, he said.

"You all do a great job, but you live in a world where everybody thinks the SPCA does a wonderful job," he said. "A lot of people resent the rigor of your adoption policies and that it makes it ridiculously hard to adopt an animal."

Almquist also said he has received numerous complaints from constituents about the SPCA's animal-control services.

Almquist said he's finding it hard to partner with an agency that vilifies supervisors, referring to a message posted this weekend on the SPCA's Web site that calls the county's latest proposal a "pick up, feed and kill solution."

Almquist questioned the SPCA's use of funds for such luxuries as animal hip replacements as well as the agency's credibility given the substandard accounting practices recently discovered by the county auditor.

"I'm not willing to give public money to an agency that continues to hide things behind what its public funds

(are used for) and what its donated funds (are used for)," he said.

Lozano said that private money funds extra services like hip replacements.

Campos said he could not "in good conscience" approve any kind of contract with the SPCA until more is known about how it has spent county money. The county is now conducting a full audit of the SPCA's records over the past two years that should answer those questions, County Auditor Gary Knutson said. The results will be available in about two weeks, he said.

Supervisors asked county staff to return to the board Thursday with more information on the latest solutions offered by both sides and specific cost estimates for SPCA services.

The board also approved plans to form a partnership with area cities to take over animal-control services from the SPCA. The agency and local cities agreed on the plan last week.

Contact Jeanene Harlick at [jharlick@santa-cruz.com](mailto:jharlick@santa-cruz.com).