

Animal Services gets funding boost



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Lottie Mitchell and her sister, Nelli, meet their new pet in the cat area of the Watsonville Animal Shelter on Thursday.

Animal Shelter Cities, county pitch in to aid strapped agency

By **DONNA JONES**
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✓ WATSONVILLE — Charlie, a tan Chihuahua mix, jumped up, stuck her snout through the bars of a kennel at the Watsonville Animal Shelter and eagerly licked a visitor's fingers.

Elsewhere, kittens slumbered in baskets and rabbits rested in enclosures. A goat sheltered in a pen outside.

The four-year-old Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority cares for thousands of animals like these each year at its shelters in Watsonville and Scotts Valley. But staff, volunteers and board members say until now there hasn't been enough money to do the job or to adequately protect the public from strays.

Chronic underfunding of the agency has meant positions going unfilled and workers burned out from putting in too many hours, leading to high turnover rates and the need for constant training of new personnel.



A cat waits for adoption at the Watsonville Animal Shelter, which will benefit from increased funding.

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The cost of animal care

Each of the five partners of the Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority agreed to increase funding for the agency this year. The following are the contributions of each:

COUNTY:
\$1.28 million.

SANTA CRUZ:
\$478,370.

CAPITOLA:
\$56,348.

SCOTTS VALLEY:
\$89,355.

WATSONVILLE:
\$453,850.

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Shelter

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"You can't hobble an organization on an ongoing basis without major consequences," said Martin Bernal, assistant Santa Cruz city manager.

Bernal said that, along with the natural increase in expenses, is why the authority's five partners — the county and four cities — agreed to bump up their overall contributions by 10 percent.

The 2006-07 budget is \$2.8 million, a \$300,000 hike that also includes modest increases in revenue from licensing and adoptions.

The increase is expected to put the struggling agency on firmer financial footing.

Until 2002, Santa Cruz County and the cities of Capitola, Scotts Valley and Santa Cruz contracted with SPCA to pick up strays and provide shelter to animals.

But the county, negotiating for itself and the cities, abruptly canceled the contract amid allegations of financial mismanagement on the part of SPCA and what officials considered exorbitant demands for budget increases.

The county then joined the three cities in establishing the authority, setting up shop in a vacant warehouse in Scotts Valley. Two years later, Watsonville joined the agency.

"This was a new agency born in a very crisis-driven mode," said interim general

manager Susan Pearlman. "It's just now that we've been able to communicate effectively what the needs of the organization are."

As an analyst in county administration, Pearlman helped set up the agency and was tapped as temporary leader when founding manager Mike McFarland resigned in June.

The increase in funding will allow the agency to fill two animal control positions that had been authorized but not adequately funded.

"We'll be able to respond to animals at large, to humane and cruelty issues, to public safety issues more comprehensively," Pearlman said.

In Watsonville, the City Council agreed to increase its contribution about \$48,000 to \$453,000. More than a quarter of the 6,100 animals brought to the shelters in 2005 came from within city limits, according to agency records.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, whose department oversaw the city shelter before the 2004 merger with the countywide agency, said the goal is to improve service while reducing the euthanasia rate and increasing adoptions.

"We're trying to find that level that provides adequate, humane services without breaking the bank," Medina said. "The current budget ... is reflective of a goal to do a better job countywide, and certainly in the city of Watsonville where many animals run astray especially during kitten season when there are so many feral ani-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A kitten waits in the display area for cats at the Watsonville Animal Shelter.

mals being born."

Volunteer Lara Walker called the budget increase "awesome." A longtime volunteer at the Watsonville shelter, she's been putting in 120 hours a month to help care for rabbits, guinea pigs and other small animals.

Now, Walker said, she can dedicate some of that time to front-end activities such as raising awareness about the importance of spaying and neutering animals. The

only way to really solve the problem of too many animals needing shelter is to stop the breeding, she said.

"I'm just really impressed (Watsonville) is acknowledging that we need the extra money and extra help and providing it this year," Walker said. "It's a huge relief. We've been struggling."

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