

# SPCA may get out of animal control



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Two dogs that are "adoptable" are being held at the SPCA pound in Santa Cruz. The agency says it will be unable to continue without a major boost in funding because of requirements of new state laws dealing with animal control.

*Animal welfare*

## Agency threatens to cut ties with cities in funds dispute

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A complicated debate over the future of animal-control efforts in most of Santa Cruz County might force the SPCA shelter out of the dog-catching business.

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, long the animal-control agent for the county, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and, to a lesser extent, Capitola, has given notice it will sever its relationships with the local municipalities. It is willing to do the job for one more year, though, if the cities and the county can supply funds to meet new requirements

mandated by state law.

The toughest of those requirements is that shelters must hold stray dogs and cats for longer periods than they do now before killing them — as long as five days for stray animals instead of 72 hours. Another state law requires dogs and cats to be spayed or neutered before they can be adopted.

A "no kill" attitude that has gained public support means that the traditional role of an animal shelter as the pound where unwanted dogs and cats are put to death is on the wane.

Consequently, the venerable  
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Jo Storsberg of the SPCA holds a cat that is available for adoption while another cat paws at her from behind.



# SPCA threatens to sever its ties

It says needs more funds to abide by new laws

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animal shelter on Rodriguez Street at Seventh Avenue in the Live Oak area east of Santa Cruz could get out of the business of patrolling for and picking up stray animals and killing them if no one adopts them.

If that happens, say SPCA officials, the three cities and the county would have to establish their own programs to deal with stray dogs and cats, complaints about barking dogs and reports of vicious canines. Watsonville, which has its own animal shelter, is not involved in the city-county contract with the SPCA.

## Extends holding periods

The new state law, written by Sen. Tom Hayden, D-Los Angeles, was designed to end killing of adoptable animals within the next decade. It calls for humane care of animals at shelters and extends holding periods between the time such animals are brought to a pound and the date they're killed.

SPCA officials say they've been warning the municipalities that the law will drastically affect their ability to keep stray dogs and cats at their shelter. Brian Taylor, part of the executive team that operates the SPCA, said it would take an additional \$458,000 — almost 50 percent above the SPCA's \$1 million contract with the cities and county — to meet the requirements of Hayden's bill.

"Four hundred and fifty-eight thousand dollars is an awful lot of money to spend to save the lives of 80 dogs," Dinah Phillips of the county administrative office said Tuesday. She said her department's figures show that only 80 so-called "adoptable" dogs were put to death at the shelter last year.

But Taylor said that figure "is absolutely incorrect."

"We euthanized 700 dogs and 1,800 cats last year, not including owner-requested procedures," he said. "We euthanize 17 percent of the adoptable dogs brought to the shelter."

That amounted to between 350 and 400 dogs last year, SPCA spokeswoman Karla Koebernick estimated Tuesday. Most of the other dogs euthanized were not suitable for adoption because they were mean, sick or wild dogs.

Calling the dispute "a horribly thorny issue," Taylor said he and his colleagues are prepared, if necessary, to operate without the governmental contracts. And, he said, the SPCA will not agree to any deals that fail to provide sufficient funds to meet the mandates



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This puppy is another of the dogs awaiting adoption at the Santa Cruz SPCA holding pen.

of not only Hayden's bill but also the new law requiring spaying or neutering of all animals adopted at California shelters.

If that \$458,000 is not forthcoming, he said, the SPCA would continue on its own, depending on grants and donations. He said he expected that financial support from the private sector would go up once the shelter goes out of the business of catching and, when necessary, killing stray dogs.

But Phillips said the county, which pays about 70 percent of the SPCA's \$1 million annual contract, is willing to negotiate with the agency to seek solutions.

## Suggests slow approach

"We understand that the Hayden bill is going to cause problems," she said. "But we have questions about what those problems are going to be. We want a phased-in approach until we see what the needs will be."

One problem as far as local government is concerned is the way the SPCA announced its decision. The group's sudden announcement Friday that it was ending its relationships with

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— Brian Taylor of the SPCA

the cities and the county caught governmental officials off guard. A county negotiator had just ended a meeting at the shelter when the SPCA issued a press release announcing the decision.

Taylor said the announcement should not have caught anyone off guard. He said his group had been warning for months that it would be unable to handle the animal-control duties without a major increase in funding.

If the SPCA follows through with its threat to stop handling animal-control services for the cities and county July 1, what are the options?

One possibility would be for the cities and the county, on their own or together, to establish or find another animal-control agency. In that case, Taylor noted, those cities and the county would still have to obey state law — and keep stray dogs and cats for five days and hold feral cats and owner-surrendered dogs and cats for four days. The new agency would also have to meet the requirement that any adopted dogs or cats be fixed.

Another option, Taylor said, is that the SPCA could continue on a temporary basis until municipal shelters are up and running, provided the SPCA is sufficiently funded to meet requirements of the new state laws. But Taylor said that idea has problems.

## Drawbacks explained

"It wouldn't make much sense," said Taylor, "to have two shelters in the same community, one that has a no-kill policy and another that euthanizes dogs and cats."

A third possibility is that some or all of the parties to the negotiations are bluffing.

And finally, some compromise might be reached.

In the long run, dog-catching is a political issue.

City council members and county supervisors have long known there is no voter as unhappy as one bothered by a neighbor's barking dog.

It will be up to the three city councils and the board of supervisors to decide in their upcoming budget hearings just how they want to deal with the matter, how much they want to spend and how much they want to hear from constituents being slowly driven mad by the barking dog next door.