

Watsonville to try *Animal Shelter* canine control effort

BY TERRI MORGAN
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In an effort to rein in aggressive dogs running loose in the city, the Watsonville Animal Shelter will begin an educational and enforcement program to encourage residents to license their canine companions.

Watsonville already has laws on its books prohibiting all canines, licensed or not, from roaming the city. But officials believe that with 15,000 residents and just 365 dog licenses issued or renewed last year, Watsonville is probably home to a large number of unlicensed dogs.

By enforcing the city's dog license law, shelter officials say, they will have increased opportunities to provide dog owners information about the city's leash law and basic animal safety.

"The animal shelter does a lot of proactive programs on enforcement and regulations," said shelter manager Lisa Giesick. "Through en-

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forcement and education, we can obtain compliance."

City law mandates all dogs over 4 months old to be licensed and vaccinated against rabies.

To draw attention to this requirement, animal control officers plan to

**Animal
shelter to
push for
licensing.**

go door to door throughout the city to obtain a dog census and notify owners about what they need to do to comply.

They also plan to create an informational brochure that includes a license application and distribute it to local animal hospitals and clinics, as well as feed and pet stores.

Shelter employees will set up and staff informational booths at community events, where they will sell dog licenses. The goal is to increase the number of licenses issued by 40

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percent during the first year of the program.

20 dog bites last year

In addition, animal control officers will continue their aggressive enforcement of the city's leash law. Greater attention was paid to the law last year, when 20 dog bites were reported.

"A common thread with most of the dog bite cases is the offending dog was running loose at the time of the attack," said Watsonville police Lt. James A. Brown. "In the last six months of 1999, the city took an aggressive stand by removing 338 stray dogs off the street."

The carousing canines were brought to the city's animal shelter, where temperament testing was

conducted to see if they were vicious.

Owners were allowed to bail out pets found not to be a threat to the community. Dogs deemed overly aggressive were subject to a hearing before being released. Dog owners were allowed to state their case on behalf of their pet, but shelter officials and police also sought testimony from neighbors, witnesses and anyone affected by the dogs' behavior.

"A dangerous dog can either be ordered out of the city or permitted to stay with stipulations," said Brown.

Safe, secure, humane

A dangerous dog is defined as any dog that demonstrates a propensity to assault, bite, scratch or harass people or other animals without provocation. Before a dog is al-

lowed to remain in Watsonville, animal control officers must be convinced it will be kept in a safe, secure and humane fashion.

Dogs displaying a greater propensity for violence and deemed capable of inflicting serious physical harm or death to a human are classified as vicious and may be ordered immediately destroyed. Vicious dogs spared a death sentence are subject to strict confinement and must be leashed and muzzled when removed from its kennel or home. Owners who fail to comply may be subject to a \$270 fine.

Licensing fees range from \$24 a year for an unaltered dog to \$12 annually for a dog that has been spayed or neutered, to \$6 a year for an altered dog owned by a senior citizen. Failure to comply can result in a \$54 fine.

"Dog licenses are the law, not an option," Giesick said.