

Grand Jury Blasts Animal Shelter

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The county grand jury today criticized the animal shelter operation, saying it's a failure as a shelter and adoption agency and subjects animals for which homes can't be found to "prolongued and painful" deaths.

The grand jury made its comments in the second part of its annual report which was released this morning. The jury said it launched its investigation of the Santa Cruz County Animal Welfare Association Inc. and the shelter it operates after receiving "many complaints" from citizens. The report indicates the jury substantiated claims that state laws have been broken in the handling of animals.

Because of the problems the jury said it discovered at the shelter, it is recommending the county look at ways of taking over control and operation of the shelter instead of renewing its contract with the association.

The county and the cities of Santa Cruz, Capitola and Scotts Valley contract with the association to provide animal control and shelter services. For those services, the county pays the association in excess of \$250,000 a year.

The grand jury also recommends a citizens committee be established to monitor the shelter situation.

The report criticizes the management of the shelter and the directors who run the association. The board of directors, according to the jury, "has been largely composed of people who receive financial benefit in the program constituting a conflict of interest."

Animal shelter Director Gail Willis this morning refused to comment, saying the grand jury had not supplied him or the association with a copy of the report.

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The only "kind" words the jury has for the shelter in the report apply to the shelter's police function, but even then the jury says the performance is "marginally effective."

The costs charged for impounding and adoption, the grand jury concludes, are excessive and do not accomplish their purpose.

"Excessive impound fees serve only to assure the loss of pets to families who can least afford the fines. Fewer pets are reclaimed and less money is taken in," according to the report.

Placement of pets in homes, the jury finds, should be a high priority of the Animal Welfare Association, but it notes the Santa Cruz shelter has "a poor record of adoptions." Less than 25 percent of the animals are adopted in Santa Cruz, according to the report, compared to more than 33 percent in Monterey County and more than 50 percent in San Francisco.

The report says adoption costs, which average \$40 (cash only) for a female cat and \$48.50 for a female dogs are too high.

Contributing factors also include an insufficient program to promote adoptions and "the reputation of the shelter for selling sick animals."

Whereas the county contract calls for proper quarantine of animals, the grand jury says it found the shelter makes little provision for separating sick or injured animals from healthy animals.

In addition to reducing adoption fees and segregating sick and healthy animals, the grand jury says volunteers should be included in an "active adoption program."

Destroying animals by euthanasia is a necessary part of animal control, the jury says, because of the public's uncontrolled proliferation of unwanted pets.

"It takes a responsible person with a gentle hand and caring attitude to give an animal a humane death," according to the report.

Such is not always the case at the Santa Cruz shelter. "Frequently, inexperienced personnel are required to administer euthanasia, necessitating repeated injections which cause a prolonged and painful death for the animal and a traumatic experience for the technician," the jury concludes.

The report recommends better training and supervision for those responsible for euthanasia and a properly designed area be established.

The jury also recommends screening or planting for the side and rear of the facility "because Green Acres school children have been disturbed by exposure to callous handling of animals and careless conversation of employees and because the plight of some of these animals would be distressing to these children."