

Estimated in 1970, this one has a donkey riding a screaming elephant  
VCP Animal Shelter R/P

# Touchy animal-control issue goes to City Council tomorrow night

By CHELA ZABIN JUL 13 1992  
STAFF WRITER

Whether Watsonville should handle its own animal control and shelter or contract with the Santa Cruz SPCA will be discussed at tomorrow night's City Council meeting.

Last September, the City Council, troubled by poor conditions at the city pound, contracted with the SPCA to provide shelter services while it figured out the best course of action. The council appointed a committee to look at the various options for animal care. The committee, which has met once a month since October last year, couldn't agree and has presented the council with two, competing proposals.

The issue has brought about a

heated debate that has spilled over into the local Letters to the Editor columns and sparked accusations that various committee members had conflicts of interest and shouldn't have voted.

Although committee members and others have examined the various proposals and disagreed over concrete matters, the debate has been fueled by philosophical differences between the pro- and anti-SPCA forces. The SPCA lobbies for animal rights and favors strict animal-control and animal-treatment regulations.

There is also a strong sentiment toward keeping the services local and a perception that Watsonville will get the short end of the stick from an agency based in Santa Cruz.

The matter is on the council's 7:30 agenda.

One of the proposals would be to upgrade the city's existing pound on Watson Street and contract with a third party to run the facility and carry out animal-control services. According to a consultant hired by the committee, the pound could be expanded from its current 441 square feet to 1,700 square feet and be fully remodeled for \$189,040. Such a shelter would be able to meet the city's needs for eight to 10 years, assuming a moderate population growth, the consultant said.

Money for the upgrade could come from a \$315,000 bequest left to the city by the late Gabrielle Olive Vierra for an animal shelter.

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The consultant also submitted a bid for service with the city. He said he could staff and run the shelter for \$149,000 with the additional start-up cost of \$15,000 for an additional animal-control vehicle. The proposal doesn't cover vehicle maintenance, fuel, utilities and insurance, which the city has estimated at \$10,000 a year. The figure for the Watson Street shelter remodel does not include road improvements, which could be extensive.

The second proposal is to contract with the SPCA for all of the city animal-control and shelter needs.

The city pound would not be used. The SPCA would charge the city \$169,000 a year, with an additional charge of \$25,000 for an additional vehicle. The SPCA's fee would cover insurance.

Committee members say that the money left by Vierra could be used for shelter services.

Watsonville Police Lt. James Brown, who chaired the meetings,

did not recommend one proposal over the other in a memo to the council outlining the two. He did, however, suggest a third option, which is to continue the city's current arrangement with the SPCA. Under the contract, the city provides its own animal control and the SPCA provides shelter services for the animals, picking them up daily at the city pound and bringing them to its shelter on Seventh Avenue. The total cost for the city would be \$135,000 annually.

Eric Frost, the city's finance director, also wrote a memo on the subject. He ranked the three options according to what he sees as the city's three major concerns — local control, the level of development of the program and low cost. Each option has some advantages and some disadvantages in these areas and end up scoring the same.

In light of the city's budgetary problems, however, Frost is recommending that the city continue with its present arrangement, "or some slight modification that will keep costs low." The current arrangement is the least costly.