

City to build state-of-the-art animal shelter

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A call from the city for bids should be going out in a couple of weeks to build a new animal shelter, one that's intended to teach an old dog pound new tricks.

Some last-minute architectural details are the only things remaining before the City Council approves the project, most likely at its next session.

The new building will replace the old shelter, which suffered from poor design and poor location, and which afforded its animals less-than-adequate conditions. The new facility is expected to cost about \$350,000, the bulk of which will be covered by a special bequest from a Watsonville woman, an animal lover who left \$300,000 to benefit animals.

The 3,000-square-foot shelter will be built in a corner of the Municipal Service Yard on Harvest Drive.

"We're really excited about this," said Bill Meade, services director of Human Animal Services, which will contract with the city to operate the facility. "We plan for this shelter to be a model for the West Coast, especially in California."

The company is the largest designer of animal shelters in the country, Meade said, and the Watsonville facility will incorporate a host of innovative designs and programs, not the least of which is to

provide counseling and referrals for families who have, let's say, become estranged from their pet.

"We are simply not going to be just a dog pound where animals are brought to be killed," said Meade, who has worked for 20 years in the business.

Foremost on the agenda, he said, is the goal of reducing the killing of animals "down to zero level."

The company will institute a multifaceted approach toward this end. First, for the first year the shelter is open, all animal will be licensed and tagged for free.

"Then we know every one of those animals, if lost or strayed, can be returned to their owner," Meade said.

The shelter's Watsonville location will also contribute to fewer animals having to be killed, he said.

Since the old Watsonville shelter closed about two years ago, the city has been contracting with the Santa Cruz SPCA for about \$150,000 a year. But the long drive tends to be prohibitive for people who either want to adopt an animal, or for those looking for a lost pet.

"Having to get to Santa Cruz has made it more difficult to retrieve animals," Meade said.

Besides contributing to the Santa Cruz SPCA's already over-

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loaded population — they handle more than 10,000 animals every year — the additional animals cut down the time an animal can be held before it must be killed, Meade said.

With the shelter so close, people will be able to do what's necessary to find a lost pet — take a quick trip down every day to check the animals.

The aesthetics of the new facility will also be a change from the norm, Meade said, making those trips more pleasant.

"Most shelters are dreary and unpleasant as they can be," Meade said. "Overall, this one will be bright and airy."

Among innovative features being incorporated into the building are bright colors, construction materials that are easy to wash and disinfect, sound control, a central pressure disinfectant system, and an air purification system to cut down transmission of airborne diseases.

And new to anyone who has visited animal shelters will be the absence of wire cages. The Watsonville facility will use a new kenneling material made of close-meshed steel that has been specially painted in bright colors and treated, Meade said.

Besides being more attractive to visitors and comfortable for the animals, the material won't be able to be chewed, doing away with a common shelter health hazard, Meade said. Each animal will have its own indoor cage with 24-hour outdoor access.

Among the shelter's new policies will be to offer low- and no-cost spay and neuter programs, and to place a big emphasis on adoption. There will be grooming facilities, where prospective adoptees can be cleaned, de-fleaed and primped. Meade said he expects to handle between 2,000 and 3,000 animals annually.

The staff, including Meade and three others, also plans to provide counseling and referral services, including finding foster homes, for animals no longer wanted.

"What's unique about Watsonville that we're so excited about is that for a small community of 30,000, it will have the most progressive, remedial programs to deal with overpopulation and irresponsible pet ownership," Meade said. "We don't want to be just a place to euthanize animals. We don't want people to just bring in animals they're mad at. We want to work with them."

"The city has said it will do whatever is necessary, through stiffer ordinances, and the police department said they will enforce pet laws."

He stressed that the programs aren't just for animal lovers, but for people who don't like animals, too. The licensing, population control and counseling will also serve as damage control for loose and stray animals, he said.

Meade had hoped to move in by the end of the year, but planning took longer than expected. The council should vote on calling for bids at its next meeting Sept. 28. If all goes well and the weather holds out, the doors should open about 90 days after construction begins, he said.