

Bequest gives Watsonville an animal shelter

By TERESA JIMENEZ
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Gabrielle Olive Vierra, a retired ballet dancer from England, depended on her dogs Rosamunda and Chloe for company while she lived in Moss Landing for 25 years, and in Rio del Mar for several years.

Vierra's dogs meant so much to her that when she died, she asked that they be put to sleep rather than go to a shelter.

"I do not believe it is possible to find a responsible person or persons willing to take care of my dogs as I would have done during my lifetime," Vierra wrote in her will in July 1983.

As a result, Vierra designated \$300,000 of her estate to go to the city for an animal shelter in Watsonville.

That money has become the subject of a battle between SPCA advocates and anti-SPCA locals, who are recommending that a larger shelter in Watsonville be built and services contracted out to an agency other than SPCA. A city employee is the only staff member at the existing shelter, located on pot-hole-ridden Watson Street.

Council members Tuesday unanimously decided to spend the money on a local shelter, and accept proposals from shelter services to operate in the city.

Among the alternatives presented by the Animal Control Review Committee, formed by council members to help solve the shelter conflict, were: receiving full service from the Santa Cruz SPCA, improving the existing shelter with no substantial changes in service, or improving and expanding the shelter with animal care contracted out.

"This whole process resulted not because of the money, but because of the fact that the vast majority of people in Watsonville felt that the city facility offended the sensibility of all animal lovers," Councilman Todd McFarren said.

The committee received only one proposal from an agency willing to operate a new Watsonville shelter — Animal Care Equipment and Services, which also provided a study on shelter in the city.

Some committee members, including Watsonville resident Tom AmRein, recommended Animal Care as the service agency for the city.

SPCA advocates argued that the county shelter in Live Oak is more accessible to potential adopters county-wide, and has a larger pool of volunteers.

"What the SPCA provides is truly animal welfare, giving the animals a chance at life," Moore said.

But Dave Carroll, a veterinarian and member of the animal care committee, said the shelter is inconvenient and does not serve Watsonville residents.

"The SPCA is 30 minutes away and wouldn't provide the type of animal control needed in Watsonville," Carroll said.

Besides, many senior citizens don't drive or don't have cars to get to the SPCA in Live Oak, people told the council.

"Pets are supposed to be good therapy for seniors — what if they lose their pet and can't get it back?" said Watsonville resident Tony Franich. "If the will says the money is for a site in Watsonville, it means a site in Watsonville."

Councilman Tony Campos agreed, quoting the will which states that the money should go for the "purpose of providing animal welfare and shelter services in the city of Watsonville," and should be transferred to the Visiting Nurses Association if the city fails to do so.

"The way it reads here, it's cut and dried," Campos said.

SPCA Executive Director Jody Paterniti said Tuesday the SPCA would be willing to submit a proposal, as well, though it did not offer to operate a Watsonville shelter during committee meetings.

City Manager Steve Salomon said the city's request for proposals could bring responses from the Monterey County SPCA and other private shelter service organizations in addition to Santa Cruz SPCA and Animal Care, which would make selection more competitive.

Vierra, who danced in such places as France, South Africa, India, Italy and South America for 11 years, also left money to the Peoples' Dispensary for Sick Animals in England (\$25,000), the Santa Cruz County Animal Welfare Association (\$25,000), Stanford University Medical School for scholarships, and various organizations in London, England.