

Animal services issue still simmers

BOARD TO ESTABLISH JOINT POWERS AGENCY

By David L. Beck
Mercury News

After a 2½-hour hearing one supervisor called "horrible" for its contentiousness, the board of supervisors and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were little closer Tuesday than they were a month ago to determining who should provide services to the lost, sick, stray and unwanted animals of Santa Cruz County.

People cried over the potential deaths of puppies. Politicians complained they were being vilified.

The SPCA is at the end of a three-year contract for providing animal control and licensing. The county previously rejected the SPCA's proposed \$2.3 million contract. On the table Tuesday was the SPCA's proposal for a \$1.6 million contract — but for animal care alone.

Instead, the county approved in principle the creation of a Joint Powers Authority to handle animal control. The authority would

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unite the public entities that have been sharing the SPCA contract. They are the county, the city of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and the University of California. Watsonville has its own shelter and its own animal control program.

The SPCA, which was never comfortable being both good cop — providing care — and bad cop — providing control — was not unhappy.

But on the issue of who runs the shelter, and how, emotions ran high. The SPCA's interim executive director, Doreen Lozano, pointed out that the law requires animals be held only five days before they are euthanized. The current local average is 16 days, giving the Santa Cruz shelter a 72 percent rate of "favorable outcomes" — animals adopted, returned home or handed off to a breed placement group.

"You don't continue this rate by low funding," Lozano told the board. Cut funds — reduce holding times — and hundreds of animals will die, she said.

Chief Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello, in her own report to the board, put the cost of both services, control and care, at approximately what the SPCA wanted for care alone. She has insisted all along that the SPCA provide a proposal that starts with a roughly 12 percent reduction in costs, like the one other county agencies are be-

by then, but not a shelter.

Another stumbling block: SPCA owns the shelter. No one has had time to explore whether the county would lease it or share it while perhaps seeking another such facility of its own.

Meanwhile, Supervisor Tony Campos revisited the April 19 reports by Mauriello and Auditor Gary Knutson,

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— SUPERVISOR JEFF ALMQUIST

ing asked to swallow.

That would put the shelter budget at \$750,000 or even less — a budget Lozano has so far refused even to consider. "We thought that this was already a bare-bones proposal at \$1.6 million," she said.

Time is a stumbling block. The contract ends with the fiscal year, June 30. Supervisors thought they could have an animal control unit in place

pointing to allegations of continued mismanagement and reminding the board that the SPCA still owes the county \$272,000 in fees it collected but did not pass on. Lozano declined to discuss proposals for repaying the money, but Campos and Supervisor Jeff Almquist let one cat out of the bag by mentioning a bid to repay it at 50 cents on the dollar — an idea Almquist called

"offensive."

"I'm not willing to give public funds to an agency that continues to hide things behind 'what's public funds and what's donated funds,'" he said. He advised the SPCA to "get real — or we're not going anywhere."

Still, Almquist voted for the idea of a Joint Powers Authority and for another update by Mauriello, after continued talks, on June 11. Only Campos voted no.

Talks continue between the two sides Thursday. After both sides called the most recent proposals "confusing," Board Chairwoman Jan Beautz gave them a long list of specifics to address in hopes of clarifying the picture.

Lozano expressed the hope that her group and the county would be able to bridge the dollar gap. "We would like to do the animal care for the county, because we can do a better job," she said. "But we're not going bankrupt in order to do it."

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