

Watsonville seeks change at dog pound

Animal shelters
New management sought for shelter

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WATSONVILLE — The city gave notice Friday it is terminating its agreement with the nonprofit group that operates the recently built animal shelter.

"The city is making this change to provide greater animal-control efforts and be more directly responsive to community needs," city leaders stated.

Humane Animal Care Services has been operating the shelter since it opened a year ago. The group is in the second year of a three-year deal with the city. It receives about \$150,000 a year to run the facility, and has three employees at the shelter.

The group plans to fight the city's action.

"We think this is bad for animals," said Vice President Bill Meade.

The group has been dedicated to having a low euthanasia rate, less than 10 percent of healthy animals. He worries that this will change under a new arrangement.

Meade's involvement with the shelter goes back to before its doors opened. He was involved in the shelter's design and is an advocate of the group's philosophy of doing what is best for the dogs and cats.

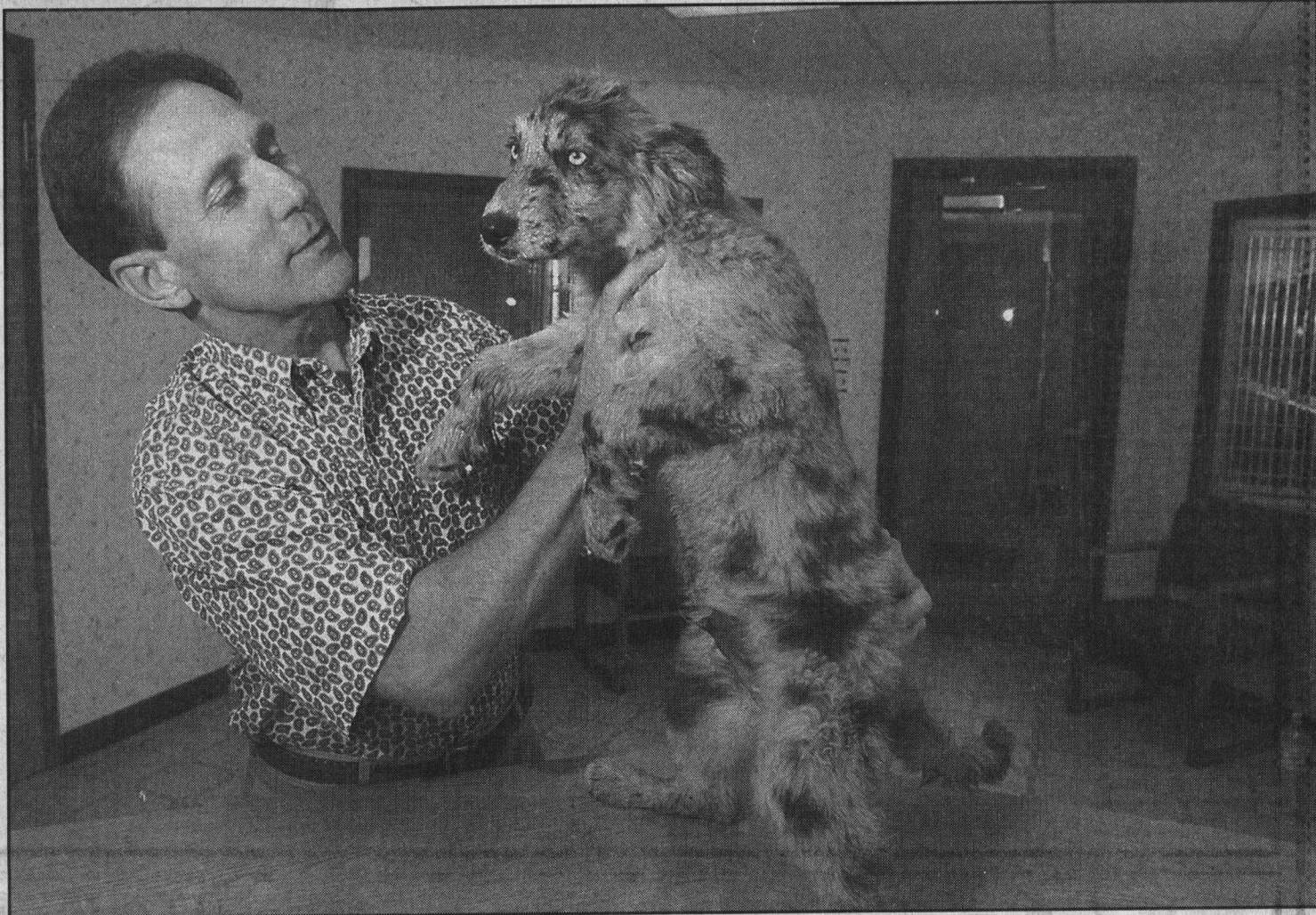
Watsonville, however, is set on ending the partnership Oct. 4, when the Police Department will be assigned the responsibilities of caring for and controlling animals in the city.

"I don't remember ever getting so many complaints about animal control as I have in the past few months," Mayor Dennis Osmer said.

Animal control, he said, is out of control.

Many of the complaints have centered around basic service issues and the way people are treated when they visit the shelter, Osmer said.

For example, people who have volunteered to work at the shelter have been



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file photo

Watsonville shelter director Bill Meade meets a client soon after the shelter opened in August.

turned away at a time when the group is asking for additional staff, he said.

"We feel there should be more emphasis on field operations," said police Capt. Mickey Aluffi. The city, he said, will likely seek proposals from other groups interested in operating the shelter.

The city's termination of the agreement comes shortly after the shelter was recognized as the best new small-city animal shelter in the country by the nonprofit group Doing Things for Animals.

"Our position is they are in clear violation," Meade said of the move to end the contract.

The city, he said, has given no written no-

tice that the group has failed to fulfill the agreement.

Meade said the city is trying to oust the group because of resident complaints about the number of stray dogs in the community. Citizens have also been urging the City Council to crack down on vicious dogs.

The shelter is aware of animal control in the city, Meade said, explaining that he has asked for an additional staff member to patrol the streets full time. So far, the shelter has had resources to go out for just four hours a day, he said.

In its first year, the shelter handled more than 1,000 strays.

The group's programs have included fol-

lowing up on all adopted animals and giving free dog licenses to owners in the city who come into the shelter.

The shelter charges for spaying and neutering, but, unlike other facilities, it charges no adoption fees, trying to find as many homes as possible for its dogs and cats.

"The city appreciates the efforts of Humane Animal Care Services over the past several years," the city said in its statement. "This organization has been instrumental in the design, construction and beginning operation of the shelter. However, the city believes that greater direct involvement of the city and the police department will increase this important service to the community."