

SPCA to sell animal shelter to Santa Cruz County

Animal Shelter

The deal ends the embattled agency's responsibility for animal care, but the two sides have not announced any resolution on the SPCA's disputed debt to the county.

By David L. Beck
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The SPCA, accused of mismanaging its animal control and care contract with Santa Cruz County and deadlocked with county officials over the price of continuing those services, has agreed to sell its animal shelter to the county.

That will take the embattled Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals out of the animal care business, at least for now, and permit the county's new joint powers authority to move ahead on both animal care and control without having to worry about where it will put the dogs and cats it takes in.

The agreement, details of which remain to be worked out between the SPCA and the board of supervisors, eases the pressure on the county to come up with a plan for dealing with sick, stray and abandoned animals when the SPCA contract ends Sunday at midnight.

The county, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Capi-

tola have created a joint powers authority to handle animal services. Susan Mauriello, the county administrative officer, told the supervisors Tuesday that the animal control portion of the operation can begin Monday.

The SPCA will continue to operate the shelter during July, for a one-time payment of \$115,000. After that the county will take it over and pay rent until the sale can be completed.

Doreen Lozano, the SPCA's interim director, said she hopes the sale happens quickly.

"They've been asking us if we were willing to

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sell," she said. "They've been asking us if we were willing to lease. And we've been saying no to both." But "negotiations have got to a point right now where there doesn't seem to be any other solution."

Most of the SPCA workers will join the county, giving them higher pay and better benefits.

Mike McFarland, the chief deputy district attorney for administration, has a background in animal services administration and has agreed to run things temporarily. Is he interested in getting back in harness, so to speak? "It's way too early," he said. "I did this for 15 years. I don't know."

No price has been set for the Seventh Avenue property. The two sides first must agree on who will do the appraisals, and those typically take from 60 to 90 days, according to Mauriello.

Outstanding debt

But any agreement must take into account two factors:

- The SPCA owes the county money.

- It wants to make enough from the sale to buy property for a new private shelter.

How much it owes remains in play. The county's recent audit put the figure at \$715,000. The SPCA agrees it must repay \$228,000 in license and other fees that it withheld, but it disputes the rest as having been spent for public purposes. Supervisors were discussing that in private, and may announce their decision Friday as part of the final day of budget hearings.

The SPCA has offered to pay the county 50 cents on the dollar to settle the debt. The county has not formally responded, but Supervisor Tony Campos dismissed the offer as insulting last month.

The SPCA also offered to give the county a pet cemetery

it owns on Sims Road, north of Pasatiempo. The county refused. Lozano said Tuesday that the SPCA has a private buyer for the 1.5-acre site. The price is \$365,000.

The SPCA will remove the little coffins containing animal remains and notify the pets' owners through advertisements. Any not claimed will be cremated, and a memorial to them will be erected when the association finds a new shelter site.

The SPCA will continue its education and animal welfare work while it struggles to get back into the shelter business, something it is determined will happen. The SPCA has had a shelter since 1934.

S.F. model

The SPCA hopes to reach an agreement with the county for something similar to the San Francisco model, under which the SPCA shelter receives adoptable animals from the public shelter after a certain period.

Whatever site the SPCA finds probably won't be as large as the one it will be selling. Current capacity is about 70 dogs and as many cats, including isolation units and space in the clinic.

Land was cheap in 1934, and the shelter sprawls over nearly three acres, zoned for a public facility but surrounded by homes. It includes two houses used for administration, three blocs of dog kennels, a veterinary clinic, a building for cats, several chicken coops "and a huge barn and paddock for livestock," said Lozano, the interim executive director.

Livestock? Sure. "Regularly we have goats, sheep, pigs. We even had an emu last year. We had a donkey walking down Highway 9 a couple of years ago — nobody claimed that."

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