

# SPCA chief forced out

## Board fighting like cats and dogs

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SANTA CRUZ — The executive director of the county SPCA is being ousted by a board of directors which has been polarized over her management style and emphasis on animal rights.

Jody Paterniti's \$52,000-a-year contract has not been renewed, and she is scheduled to depart from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals April 1. She will leave behind a board so factionalized that it

is undergoing conflict resolution and a staff which opposes her departure.

Paterniti maintains that she doesn't know the reason she is being let go. "I really don't know. I've asked repeatedly, 'What are your issues?' I'm not told what they are."

Employees maintain that discrimination is included in the mix. Seven women — some lesbian and some not — filed a grievance last week, charging they were discriminated against based on sexual gender and orientation. According to the women's law-

yer, Jennifer Drobac, they are asking for a state investigation into SPCA employment procedures.

Although Paterniti's ouster is not part of their complaint, the women fear Paterniti is being let go because she hires women, lesbians and gays, and has refused to stop, said Drobac.

"The split (on the board of directors) is along liberal/conservative lines in the broadest sense of the word," said Dinah Phillips, a county analyst who handles the SPCA contract.

"Jody's supporters like the SPCA's advocacy work; its proactive animal rights

stance. The others are less interested in that, and more interested in the animal control part," she said.

Board president Terry Riley would not comment, except to say board members are going through a conflict resolution process and have signed statements pledging confidentiality.

"I don't want to derail that. We have some personnel matters and we're handling them," said Riley. "It really wouldn't be appropriate for me to say anything."

"We're trying to figure out the issues we have among board members as well," he

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Jody Paterniti

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added.

Riley did confirm that when Paterniti's contract expired in December she was given an extension until April.

The board is now split 4-4 regarding Paterniti. Paterniti said the board took a closed-door vote several months ago to move her into another position at the same salary. From the newly created post, Paterniti was to raise funds. A new executive director would be in charge of staff and operations.

Paterniti rejected the move. The board since then has been deadlocked, she said.

"There's no legitimate reason for firing her," said Joan De Neffe, a volunteer and Paterniti supporter. What they're trying to do is eliminate the possibility they would be sued for wrongful dismissal by creating this parallel structure."

Paterniti speculated that the key issue is her management style, which emphasizes "empowering" employees, decision-making by consensus and self-directed work teams of employees.

By contrast, her detractors on the board believe in hierarchy of management, according to Paterniti.

Paterniti's practices have drastically reduced employee turnover in a profession where burnout is high, said Kit Salisbury, an SPCA manager.

Salisbury was one of a dozen employees who protested Paterniti's pending dismissal Monday. Of 34 employees, 32 have signed a letter of support for Paterniti.

Ironically, the SPCA's mandatory spay-neuter law, a contentious ordinance in the community, is not the problem, according to Paterniti. Both sides of the divided board supported its passage.

Besides promoting animal adoptions, the SPCA's mission is to prevent cruelty to animals, stop pet overpopulation and promote community responsibility for humane care. About 9,000 animals a year are taken to the shelter, which has a \$1 million annual budget. SPCA enforcement covers the county except for Watsonville, which has its own animal shelter.

The shelter has moved away from the days of dog catchers toward animal rights. The shelter's mission statement reflects that change, saying its purpose is to "insure the best possible quality of life for animals and to promote respect and reverence for all life."

Supporters say that since becoming executive director in 1991, Paterniti has headed the successful campaign for the mandatory spay-neuter ordinance and overseen major improvements at the shelter, including a new cat building and livestock barn.

The shelter has also initiated more animal cruelty and neglect cases than at any time in the local SPCA's history, and animal-related complaints are at an all-time low, said De Neffe.

Paterniti has raised more than \$35,000 annually in shelter donations, according to De Neffe.

Among the larger donors are philanthropists Jack and Elena Baskin of Santa Cruz. The Baskins have sided with Paterniti.

"Because of Jody Paterniti we have raised our year-contributions and have included the SPCA in our

will," the couple said in a letter to the board.

Riley didn't dispute those accomplishments.

Board member Sam Burkhardt, who supports Paterniti, said the dispute includes personality, management style and differences in philosophy.

Several board members have resigned because of the hostilities. "A struggle for control has displaced the need to function effectively," said Frieda Sherman, who resigned in July.

"A number of board members continue to obstruct any positive efforts to ameliorate friction between staff members and the board," she said.

Sherman said an "atmosphere that poisons any positive actions" prevailed during the meetings. "Some board members have become so antagonized by the atmosphere they are unwilling to speak."

Another former board member, Cheryl Price, a Paterniti supporter, also resigned in July citing a "tremendous amount of hostility, friction as well as plain old rudeness" on the board.

The bylaws allow for a 17-member board, but only eight remain, and attempts to increase the number have been blocked by the controversy.

In February the board approved two new members from among nine candidates. The others were turned away.

The Paterniti supporters are disputing the seating of the two, saying they were recruited by the anti-Paterniti members, while qualified candidates were turned away.

"It would have thrown the balance of power away from them, said De Neffe of the anti-Paterniti faction. "They would have lost control."

Riley said there is no dispute. "As far as I know there is no official dispute. We had an election and had some people that were elected and some that were not."

Among the rejects were beer distributor and former board member and donor George Couch; Thomas Graves, a volunteer; and Naomi Kirschenbaum, an Aptos veterinarian.

In a letter to Riley, Graves subsequently accused the board of participating "in a conspiracy of silence," and said he suspected he wasn't seated because he believes in "democratic management, which is something you and your faction do not favor."

After attending a meeting in December, Couch suggested the conflict resolution process and even offered to pay for it.

The board has now had two conflict resolution sessions, at a cost of \$150 each, said Riley.

Kirschenbaum, who opposed the mandatory spay-neuter policy, was critical of Paterniti's handling of the ordinance.

"I found gaps in her logic," said Kirschenbaum. "I really felt like she had an agenda and she really wasn't interested in anyone else's input if it didn't fit with what she wanted to do."

"I find it hard to work with her because I don't see her listening or following through," she said.

Before she became executive director, Paterniti was president of the SPCA board. A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, she worked for 15 years in business administration, including at Silicon Systems.