

Animal ^{welfare} doctors oppose pet law

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SANTA CRUZ — Veterinarians spoke out strongly Monday against a pet overpopulation ordinance set to be approved today without discussion by the county Board of Supervisors.

If adopted, the ordinance would make it illegal to feed wild cats or to breed dogs and cats without registering with the SPCA.

Besides local veterinarians, an animal-issues group, the county Farm Bureau, and the local Fish and Game Advisory Commission have lined up against the ordinance.

"Passing this ordinance may prove to the Board of Supervisors to be not only a monumental embarrassment but potentially a legal conundrum that can cost the county taxpayers a great deal," said Naomi Kirschenbaum, the president of the Santa Cruz Veterinary Medical Association in a letter to the board.

Veterinarians are skeptical of the ordinance, Kirschenbaum said Monday.

"They think it's ridiculous and can't be enforced," she said. "... It's the SPCA rushing around with this banner flying, and the Board of Supervisors is patting them on the back and thinks they've done something."

And unless the board acknowledges the "longstanding mistrust" that some in the veterinary community harbor toward the SPCA, Kirschenbaum said, it will be unable to understand the awkward position in which veterinarians find themselves.

That background of mistrust, she said, means that the county's veterinary hospitals "may be a very long way from being able to provide the pro bono work the

Please see PET — A4

Pet law opposed

Continued from Page A1

SPCA has requested of us in order for them to effectively enforce the feral cat provision" of the ordinance.

"Please strongly consider that this ordinance be tabled for one or two years," Kirschenbaum said.

The SPCA has described the ordinance as a way to cut down the number of dogs and cats killed at the shelter each year.

Supervisors have already adopted the ordinance in concept and are scheduled to approve it without discussion today.

If passed, the ordinance would require all dogs and cats older than six months to be spayed or neutered unless their owner purchases a \$15 per year "unaltered animal" certificate.

The ordinance would also make it illegal for anyone to feed stray cats for more than 30 days without registering with the SPCA and agreeing to trap the cats and sterilize, vaccinate and test for them for disease.

Protest has also come from individuals worried that the ordinance would hurt those it's designed to help.

"Feral cat caregivers are very protective of their animals," wrote a woman who said she's helped get hundreds of feral cats spayed or neutered. "They are not about to reveal the location of their cats to an organization known to trap and kill feral cats."

Most of the people feeding stray cats are elderly women on small, fixed incomes, said Mae Stern. Most would be only too glad to

have their animals sterilized and inoculated, she said, but threatening them with fines is not the way to go about it.

"The SPCA, by its actions, must first win the trust of caregivers before they can expect those to people to register, thereby placing themselves and their cats in a vulnerable position," she said.

The ordinance also would outlaw selling or giving away kittens or puppies in public places, or without displaying the number of the unaltered-animal certificate.

The ordinance would take effect July 1 and would cover all animals in the unincorporated parts of the county. The city of Scotts Valley has considered a similar ordinance, and the SPCA hopes to get the ordinance adopted in the county's other three cities.