

Animal shelter director dog-tired, resigns

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SANTA CRUZ — The man in charge of dogcatching and other county animal services resigned Wednesday as executive director of the Santa Cruz County Animal Welfare Association.

The resignation of Gail C. Willis, 64, comes at a time when the status of the Welfare Association in the county is in limbo.

Willis' resignation takes effect Nov. 15, when he plans to retire.

Willis said Thursday morning, "I'm just worn out. That's what everybody who manages a humane society faces."

Being a director of the dogpound can be a thankless task.

"What you're doing is not easy and people aren't always pleased. There's an awful lot of pressure. It's a very emotional kind of thing."

"I feel we've been overly criticized, sure I do," said Willis.

From time to time, newspaper letters to the editor are rampant with criticism of animal shelter services.

A 1981-82 Grand Jury alleged animal abuse and mismanagement at the Seventh Avenue animal shelter run by the Association. Investigators from the American Humane As-

sociation said problems stemmed from lack of money and bad management.

Criticisms in the report "are compounded each time someone refers to it," said Willis.

"What the Grand Jury said is still hanging in the air. There's no way to ever erase that."

Taking care of people's pets is not only an emotional issue, but a political one. In fact, it's a political hot potato.

"It seems to be a very political kind of job. I don't think it should be, but you find yourself in it whether you like it or not," he said.

Willis' advice to his successor might be something like, "speak softly and carry a big stick. I don't know."

In budget hearings in June, supervisors responded to public testimony about alleged abuses to animals by the association program.

Supervisors decided to extend their contract with the association only until Oct. 1.

At that time, supervisors will consider contract proposals from several organizations — including the Animal Welfare Association — for patrol and kennel services.

"We're required to submit a proposal, just as if they've never heard of us," said Willis.

One proposal submitted by the Humane

Society of Santa Cruz County and Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals includes pet "adoption centers" near the sites of the county's three dumps.

Whoever gets the contract will face the same problems, said Willis — "there's the internal administrative set up, in addition to handling the work. There are emergencies every night, injured animals and stray livestock. Those things don't stop."

Willis says he will stay involved in the field. "I've been in this work ever since I was 20," he said.

Willis still serves on the board of the state Humane Association.

He says he has one cat.

"We had a cat and a dog, and they lived to be 17 years old, and when they went, my wife said, 'no more.' But, then I brought a kitten home.

"I can't see having any more animals than you can really pay attention to."

Dr. Joseph Ramaekers, Board President of the Association, announced Willis' resignation was accepted "with regret."

Dr. Ramaekers said the board is working with county staff to hire a new director.