

Board approves pet microchip requirement

Animal Welfare

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Law to be sought in cities as well

By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County on Tuesday joined a growing list of communities requiring pets to be microchipped, voting 4-1 to implement the controversial policy.

County animal control officials sought the change to help track and reunite stray animals with their owners, dismissing medical concerns and criticism that it is a money-

making ploy or an invasion of privacy.

"This is not about getting information, it's not about soliciting, it's not about getting money. It's simply about getting animals home as quickly as possible," said Melanie Sobel, general manager of the Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter.

The requirement joins the Santa Cruz County with several California communities requiring pet microchips, including Long Beach, Riverside and Los Angeles County.

Sobel said she intends to seek microchip laws in each of the county's four cities as well.

About the size of a large grain of rice, the chips contain a code that provides a link to an ownership record when scanned. When the law goes into effect — likely in at least six weeks — animal officers would be able to scan pets to check for compliance.

Sobel said citations would be treated as "fix-it" ticket, with the issue generally handled the same as requirements to spay and neuter pets. Microchipping is available for

\$25 (and often less) at the shelter, and elsewhere from veterinarians, with chips inserted using a hypodermic needle.

"It's one of the most benign procedures we do," said Dr. Dana Gleason, staff veterinarian at the county animal shelter.

The Santa Cruz SPCA will offer free microchipping.

Supervisor Greg Caput voted against the proposal, saying he thought microchipping should stay voluntary.

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CHIP

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"This one thing is not big government, but if you add a hundred little rules we're making criminals out of people who are sometimes well-meaning," Caput said, though the law includes only civil penalties.

Sobel said microchips can be valuable in a number of ways, including allowing the

shelter to scan pets before adopting or euthanizing them to avoid mistakes. Sobel also said chips can be used to better track dangerous dogs.

But most people use microchips to reunite with lost pets. More than twice as many microchipped dogs are reunited with their owners, while chipped cats are reunited at 20 times the rate of nonchipped cats.

Just last week, Sobel said, a cat who wandered away from its Felton home was

found in Capitola. It was scanned and reunited with its grateful owner.

"I can't tell you how many stories we have of animals that have been reunited that wouldn't have if they hadn't been microchipped," Sobel said.

While controversial when first proposed, just two members of the public spoke against the idea at Tuesday's vote. Both were advocates who frequently speak out against wireless technology

and other issues before the board.

"I do think this is a revenue stream for the shelter, which is fine," said Katharine Herndon, who is concerned about chips getting into the environment and thinks owners should be able to opt out. "I want to be able to adopt a pet that hasn't been microchipped."

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