

Hackles raised during shelter meeting

By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES - Frustration on all sides - evident by sometimes-heated discussion and even a few tears - was readily apparent during a public meeting about the Doña Ana County-Las Cruces animal shelter Thursday.

The roughly 30-member audience seemed divided into two general camps. Most seemed to feel the shelter's director, Beth Vesco-Mock, has greatly improved operations at the facility in her year-and-a-half tenure. While others contended she - and board members - haven't done enough. Still others placed the blame on the community for allowing the pet overpopulation to occur.

It's a recurring theme in the animal shelter debate.

The most recent flare-up seemed to have resulted from a concern by a volunteer about crowding of animals in an outbuilding on the shelter property, which prompted a lobbying effort by some critics who approached shelter board members on a one-to-one basis with their complaints.

That set the stage for tension at the monthly board meeting of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley.

It started with comments during an input session, continued about midway through the meeting with a rebuttal by Vesco-Mock and input from board members and finally capped off with yet more audience comments.

Renee Davis, who has volunteered at the shelter since August 2008, raised the concerns about the outbuilding. At issue, she said, is that the 10 dogs being kept in the facility had to stay in cages for 17 to 19 hours each day without being let out. "Some of those animals never would go to the bathroom in those kennels, and if they were let out, they're out for five minutes, they couldn't do that," she said. "Some of them were in their feces and poop and urine and water for hours."

Davis said she spoke to Vesco-Mock about the problem, but it didn't change.

Vesco-Mock, in response, acknowledged that the animals in the outbuilding, which were either being treated for heartworms or bound for rescue centers, did stay in their cages for long periods, but, were given the chance to run outside, which is more than animals in regular shelter runs get. She said the shelter's cages and runs each morning are messy, but they are cleaned.

"I am going to continue to use it," she said. "I don't feel they're inhumanely kept, and I'm going to continue to use it."

Davis said she's asking for more regular care of animals kept in the building, if it must be used.

In addition, Vesco-Mock said, the outbuilding expands the shelter's capacity; the dogs otherwise would be euthanized because of a lack of space.

City Councilor Dolores Connor defended Vesco-Mock, saying that many of the director's critics seem to be asking the board to become involved in the daily operations at the shelter, when the board's actual job is setting policy. Connor said the barrage of criticism is hindering the shelter's progress.

"How can you look for good morale, when it's being constantly beat up?" she said. "I need people to step up and actually get involved in a positive manner."

Attendee Jane Carter, a 30-year Las Cruces-area resident, spoke in favor of Vesco-Mock.

"We've not had a director in this community in the time I've lived here who has put in what this woman has, who has the educational background and the experience, and what do we see?" she said. "You could send Jesus down here, and these people would complain."

Two board members, City Councilors Miguel Silva and Nathan Small, proposed creating a structured complaint system to address the public's concerns.

Vesco-Mock said she's amenable to the idea.

Several attendees seemed to agree there was too much finger-pointing going on.

Small said the debate has been characterized by personal attacks, something that must change.

"We've got to try to get away from pointing fingers at individuals, while not shying away from what folks don't think are significant and legitimate issues," he said.

County Sheriff Todd Garrison said he sees a need for more forgiveness among those involved in the discussion.

"I look at the people involved - the director, the board and the community - and it's going to take strong leadership to get this done," he said. "By working together, we're going to see something happen."

Jay Sims, who fosters cats on behalf of the shelter, noted the root of the shelter's problems lie elsewhere.

"We have to have the community committed to quality of life for our animals; we have to stop the inflow" to the shelter, he said.

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On the Web

New Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley Web site:

<http://www.ascmv.org>