

Animal activists applaud repairs at shelter

By Diana M. Alba DALBA@LCSUN-NEWS.COM

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LAS CRUCES - A heating, cooling and ventilation system that recirculates contaminated air, exposing pets to disease, has long been a source of angst among those who follow the city-county animal shelter closely.

But animal groups are lauding a decision last week by shelter officials to spend up to \$120,000 overhauling the system and bringing it up to par for the building's needs. The result, they said, is that animals should be healthier at the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley.

Some people also said the decision signaled a positive change in the usual contention that surrounds the shelter.

And officials said a second important step, sealing floors at the shelter to keep disease from building up, is also in the works.

Three staff members from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals visited the shelter in early July and later presented a report to the board that was critical of the shelter's ventilation system and the unsealed concrete blocks and floors, which harbor disease.

Asked whether the ASPCA visit played a role in the board's decision, City Councilor Miguel Silva, chairman of the animal shelter board, said the board has been aware of the problems and noted that the goal is outlined in a strategic plan for the shelter.

Still, he admitted, "if anything, ASPCA coming in and shedding light on these capital improvements - it probably prompted us to move a little faster, but we knew these items needed to be addressed."

Shelter director Dr. Beth Vesco-Mock said she has advocated for them since arriving at the shelter in 2008. Indeed, she said she's worked to save money during the two budget cycles she's headed shelter operations for the capital improvements that will fund the board's decision last week.

"My last two years, we've been as fiscally responsible as possible so we could do these improvements," she said. "These are monies we've saved. We're not going out to taxpayers and getting more money."

The capital improvements fund currently holds about \$200,000, Silva said.

Frank Bryce, president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, said he was ecstatic about the board's decision to fund repairs. He's complained for years about the ventilation system being in disrepair.

"It will improve the health of the animals because it will be a better environment," he said. "If done correctly, it will save a gob of money on medical treatment."

Bryce said unsealed surfaces can hold bacteria and viruses.

"Bacteria can get in there and it acts like a little petri dish," he said.

A joint board of city councilors and county commissioners governs the shelter.

Silva said part of the reason the board hasn't acted earlier was because of disagreement between the city and the county about which entity was responsible for paying the cost of building upgrades.

"One of the hurdles we overcame, including myself, is, it's city-county tax dollars and the animals area the top of the list, so we're going to move forward and fix the HVAC system."

Said Vesco-Mock: "I'm excited city and county governments have come together to work on this issue."

The building is still owned by the city of Las Cruces only, not the city-county governing body.

Silva said the city paid about \$23,000 for a professional assessment of the ventilation system, and if offering another \$50,000 to pay for the upgrade of the flooring and walls.

Silva said it's not yet known how much the sealing of the floors and walls will cost, but, once that's known, the center will be able to make decisions about how to proceed.

The board also heard an update about improvements to an outbuilding on the shelter property that's used to quarantine sick dogs, while they're being treated. A group of volunteers and local businesses has stepped forward with donations and manpower to make the needed repairs.

Jake Sims, president of the nonprofit Doña Ana County Humane Society, said he's seen an effort on the part of more people to begin solving the problems and not just talking about them, noting that he was especially encouraged by the group that organized the improvements to the outbuilding. And the board's decision was positive, he said.

"It's a good move because, if you take the problems and just start solving them, pretty soon you've got them all done," he said. "Part of the problem the last few years is there's been too much dissension and not enough action."

Said Bryce: "Almost everybody had to walk away with a good feeling after this important step."

Sims said the fixes are a good start, but "the ultimate thing we need is a new shelter."

The city-county board met in a special session Friday and agreed to fund the ventilation system improvements, but still must formally vote at a later meeting.

Diana M. Alba can be reached at (575) 541-5443

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- Information: (575) 382-0018. www.ascmv.org/