

# LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

## **More complaints surface about animal shelter**

**By Diana M. Alba dalba@lcsun-news.com**

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LAS CRUCES - A rodent infestation in a building that houses sick dogs and pet overcrowding at the city-county animal shelter were among a list of broad-ranging complaints expressed recently by a local animal welfare group.

The Las Cruces-based Humane Society of Southern New Mexico sent out a list of its concerns - including several it has voiced previously - in a news release last week.

Several complaints related to the condition of a modular building on the shelter grounds that's used to quarantine ill dogs, and house rabbits and sometimes other animals.

The humane society released photos - it said were taken by an anonymous employee in early May - showing mice droppings among cages and signs the walls had been nibbled upon by rodents. In addition, the group is concerned about how frequently cages are cleaned.

Maryln Zahler, vice president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, said the first photos from the modular building came to the humane society "unsolicited" from an employee. She said she and group President Frank Bryce followed that up with a visit to the shelter and a meeting with city officials who oversee the shelter buildings.

The mice are being attracted to dog food.

"It is a real problem with that double-wide," she said. "There are just so many problems."

The complaints are expected to be discussed during a shelter board meeting today.

Wednesday, shelter director Beth Vesco-Mock said city officials have agreed to address the rodents, which she said have been "an ongoing problem for over a year."

"We kill them; they come back," she said. "We kill them; they come back."

The animal shelter property and buildings are owned by the city of Las Cruces. Operations, since February 2009, have been directed by a joint board of city and county officials.

Las Cruces City Councilor Miguel Silva, chairman of the animal shelter board, said he was alerted about the complaint regarding a rodent infestation around May 17 and took the concern to Assistant City Manager Robert Garza, who said he'd assign the city's vector control to the immediate problem. Silva said he toured the facility, unannounced, a day later, and could still see signs of the infestation, though they didn't appear to be as bad as the earlier photos showed.

Still, Silva said the animal shelter board will have to decide how to address the broader issue of deficiencies in the modular building in the long-term. Options for repairs, as well as the costs, must be identified, he said.

"How we go about making that assessment is going to be something we discuss (today)," he said.

Eventually, Silva said, "a tough decision will have to be made by the board about whether that facility is acceptable."

Vesco-Mock said she uses the modular building to house dogs that become ill but would be adoptable, once they recover. She has said previously that, prior to her arrival at the shelter, such animals would have been given no chance and euthanized. She noted that cages are cleaned twice per day.

The nonprofit humane society has been critical of the shelter conditions, sometimes taking aim at Vesco-Mock, for much of the past two years.

Vesco-Mock is scheduled today for a performance review during a closed meeting of the board.

Zahler assured the group's complaints aren't being released to coincide with Vesco-Mock's review. She said many parties are to blame for conditions at the shelter, including the general public which creates the pet overpopulation problems in the county and city and county officials, who've not taken concerns seriously over the past decade.

Vesco-Mock said to cut down on pet euthanasias and overpopulation, "we need to stop pointing fingers at one another."

"We need to work together," she said.

Other concerns cited by the humane society were tied to the main shelter building and shelter operations. The group said too many animals are being housed in the facility, "creating stress on animals" and "endangering animals (and) staff to disease and bites."

Silva noted that the shelter's capacity is about 250, but it's holding twice that many animals.

Vesco-Mock has explained her policy of keeping multiple animals per cage, saying it allows her to save more lives.

Silva said trying to align the county, the city and the public's expectations about the shelter is "tough."

"We're all trying to get the same outcomes, but it's challenging in trying to bring all three parties on track to attain those same goals," he said.

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

### **Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley board members**

- Miguel Silva, city councilor
- Dolores Connor, city councilor
- Nathan Small, city councilor
- Oscar Vasquez-Butler, county commissioner
- Scott Krahling, county commissioner
- Jess Williams, county spokesman

### **If you go**

- What: Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley board meeting
- When: 9 a.m. today
- Where: Doña Ana County Government Center, 845 N. Motel Blvd., Las Cruces
- Info: (575) 647-7200