

## **Las Cruces floats low-cost pet medical center idea**

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

**Posted: 08/16/2011 11:33:47 PM MDT**

LAS CRUCES - An idea to create a new, low-cost spay-neuter and pet medical center in central Las Cruces is on the table, officials said Tuesday.

The center could more than double the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley's capacity to carry out spay and neuter services - something needed to reduce pet overpopulation and euthanasias, animal advocates have said.

However, the proposal, which would entail revamping a used modular building, could cost a quarter of a million dollars yearly to operate, and a source of money has yet to be identified, officials have said.

Since the start of the month, when the shelter bumped up its number of pet sterilization surgeries, about 50 pets per week are being spayed and neutered at the main shelter location off U.S. Highway 70, north of Las Cruces, shelter director Beth Vesco-Mock said.

Another 75 dogs and cats each week could undergo surgeries at the proposed new center, resulting in expanded capacity, Vesco-Mock said.

"We'll increase our numbers of spays and neuters and offer some affordable vet services - some things people cannot afford to have done," she said.

The site of the proposed expansion is on Hadley Avenue near the Meerscheidt Recreation Center. It was occupied by some city personnel before they moved to the new City Hall on Main Street, said Robert Garza, assistant city manager.

"It's a 25-feet by 25-feet portable building," he said. "It's something we wanted to phase out of our operation."

Garza said a comparable structure that was new likely would cost about \$80,000.

Vesco-Mock, who reports directly to a board composed of both city and Do-a Ana County officials, said the city first approached her with the idea to use the building as an affordable pet medical center. Because the facility would be at a different location, it would require a second state license and paying a second supervising veterinarian, Vesco-Mock said. Plus, technical staff would be needed, she said.

Still, Vesco-Mock said she thought she could find room in the shelter's budget to handle the added expense, possibly starting operations sometime in 2012.

Garza said, however, it's the city and county that pay into the animal services center fund. Though spending decisions are made by the county-city board, Garza said he's familiar with the shelter's budget, and "I don't believe they have that much latitude in their budget to expand programming right now."

City Councilor Miguel Silva said he likes the concept of the affordable spay-neuter and medical center, but there are still specifics that need to be ironed out.

"I'm still concerned as to where the funding is going to come from," he said.

Representatives with the Spay and Neuter Action Program of Do-a Ana County told councilors that their group, too, is ready to increase the numbers of spay and neuter surgeries it's conducting. But the group is lacking funding.

Jake Sims, a Las Cruces animal advocate, told officials they were moving in the right direction with the attention being paid to animal issues. But they need to improve their gathering of pet impound data to become more strategic about their efforts to reduce pet overpopulation. And animal-related groups should work together more cohesively, he said.

"We have to cooperate, instead of shooting ourselves in the foot," he said.

In 2010, some 8,350 animals were euthanized at the shelter, according to a shelter report. Officials have said the euthanasia rate has declined the past three years.

How much of an impact would expanded spay-neuter center have?

"There's so much out there, I'm not sure," Vesco-Mock said. "But we can't think about what we cannot do. We have to think positively about what we can."

### **Next steps**

For the building to be given away, Garza said the city council must vote to donate it to the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley. That likely will go before the council Sept. 6.

Then, the ASCMV board would also have decide to accept it and how to fund any new operations, Garza said.

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