

Officials: Shelter's budget barking up wrong tree

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LAS CRUCES - City officials so far aren't on board to meet the animal shelter's full request for more dollars in the coming year.

And that means shelter operations will have to curtail plans for much-needed building improvements, said Dr. Beth Vesco-Mock, director of the city-county run Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley.

Specifically, the \$85,000 city officials are reluctant to commit could pay for new, disease-resistant flooring in two kennel wards, Vesco-Mock said.

"The impact will be: I'll have less money to do the improvements the community appears to want me to do at the shelter," she said.

Some animal welfare advocates have taken aim at the shelter's outdated flooring in recent years because it's porous and harbors disease. A new floor was installed in one major kennel wing during the current financial cycle.

The fiscal year starts July 1, but county and city officials are planning the budget now.

Increases likely

While the shelter is not likely to get its full request from the city, it still would see an increase from both the city and county from the current year.

Vesco-Mock, in her formal budget request, had sought about \$1.68 million - \$881,800 from the county and \$797,800 from the city - for the next year's operations. That's about a 10.8 percent increase from last year. The city-county split is based on pet intake numbers at the shelter.

Plus, Vesco-Mock said she'd hoped to carry over budget savings from the current year to fund capital improvements in 2011-12.

City Manager Robert Garza said the city is facing a 6 percent budget cut in all of its other departments, and the shelter's proposed budget was "very much in the opposite direction."

"I'm not sure it's the time to increase funding for the animal services center by 10.8 percent," he said.

If the city met Vesco-Mock's full request, it would pay \$147,000 more than in the present fiscal year, Garza said. He said he's willing to recommend about a \$712,000 funding level, about a 9.5 percent increase on the city's part.

Frank Bryce, president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, said he believes there's still room for the shelter to become more efficient, even though it has made progress in improving operations. For instance, he said hiring a vet, something the facility is in the process of doing, will likely save money.

"I think it's too much," he said of Vesco-Mock's proposal.

Vesco-Mock noted that both the city and county sharply dropped their funding levels going into 2010-11 by about \$212,100, combined. That was because the county, which was having budget problems, had to cut back, and the city followed suit.

Another reason Garza said he's not backing the full increase is because the shelter is on target to have unused operational dollars in its account June 30. That's money that can be used to meet the shelter's full request, he said.

Vesco-Mock said she'd planned to put those savings into the capital fund, for building improvements. County Manager Brian Haines, too, said he thought that had been the understanding.

"If we start taking capital reserves to balance out the budget, as opposed to the contributions, then those cash balances will eventually go away if we do this year after year," he said.

On top of city and county money, fees for pet licenses and adoptions make up another portion of revenues.

Budget delayed

The animal shelter board - made up of city and county officials - on Thursday voted, 4-2, to postpone approval of the shelter's 2011-12 budget.

Board member and City Councilor Dolores Connor proposed the delay, saying the board should wait until the county commission and city council independently decide upon their share of funding for the facility.

Agreeing with Connor were City Councilors Nathan Small, Miguel Silva and county spokesman Jess Williams, who's on the board. But County Commissioners Billy Garrett and Karen Perez voted in opposition.

Expanded hours

The proposal would allow the shelter to hire an additional part-time staff member to help coordinate the foster-to-adopt program, which puts pets in people's homes before they're formally adopted, and to open the shelter earlier each day for certain services, such as dropping off a dog or cat, Vesco-Mock said. Now, she said, the shelter doesn't open until noon to the public, meaning anyone who shows up before that has to "bang on the door" to get in.

"It's not really being friendly to the citizens of Doña Ana County," she said. "We want to assist them in their needs and their animal welfare issues."

The budget proposal would allow the shelter to boost public education about pet overpopulation, Vesco-Mock said.

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