

LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

On the positive side

Commentary: Demand accountability on shelter

By Mike Hainer For the Sun-News

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In January 2007, the city of Las Cruces and Doña Ana County joined together to fund and operate the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, our only publicly funded animal shelter.

Our shelter accepts animals from the public and both city and county animal control services and either adopts them out or destroys the animals. Fulfilling this role in a humane and responsible manner has been under great scrutiny for the past few years.

This is a taxpayer-funded, publicly operated function of local government and regular public disclosure is expected. This would include data on the number of animals received, number successfully placed and the numbers killed. We should also expect disclosure of the operational and capital funds expended as well as the details of our city and county strategic plan with specific goals to address the ever increasing costs and numbers of animals being delivered to the ASCMV and destroyed there at great taxpayer expense.

City operation of the ASCMV, along with recent increases in staffing, the initial steps toward increased funding of the ASCMV by the city and the initial steps toward forming an oversight board are encouraging. However, the once regular public meetings initiated by the city and county managers have been discontinued over the past six months. ASCMV operational statistics for the past eight months have not been presented to the public. No plan is yet disclosed to use the \$280,000 in legislative capital appropriations for shelter improvements that was acquired by local advocates in the 2008 legislative session. There has been no citizen participation in developing a communitywide strategic plan to address the increasing cost of our community's "seize-and-kill" policy for companion animals. We have not even hired a licensed veterinarian. A licensed veterinarian is an unfulfilled goal set by our city and county staff eight months ago for a public shelter that may handle more than 17,000 animals this year and appears well on the way to killing 13,000 of them.

On the positive side, all of us have access to our city council and city administrative staff, as well as our county commissioners and county administrative staff. All of these folks care about building a better community and are responsive when the public demands it. Call, write and e-mail your city councilors, city manager, county commissioners and county manager and request public disclosure and regular reporting of operations. Demand that public planning begin now to address our very serious animal overpopulation problem and our failing "catch-and-kill" policies. Many of these good folks will come up for election next year and we need to see what they are willing to do and what they are able to accomplish. Now is the time to move together and support our community leaders who are willing to stop the killing of adoptable animals and who have the resolve to end the cycle of ever increasing costs of our animal killing system.

Michael Hainer is president of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.