

# Supervisors show support for privatizing animal services

**By Anne Ternus-Bellamy**

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WOODLAND — Yolo County supervisors expressed support Tuesday for a recommendation to privatize the county's animal services program through formation of a joint powers authority.

The proposal comes from a report by the Animal Protection League, which was commissioned by Yolo County's Local Agency Formation Commission to see if animal services — including adoptions, rescues and licensing — could be provided in a more efficient, cost-effective way.

The report, which found that privatization could reduce both costs in the long run as well as euthanasia rates, will be presented to city councils throughout the county over the next few weeks.

Currently, the Yolo County Sheriff's Department runs the animal shelter in Woodland and provides animal services for the cities of Davis, West Sacramento, Winters and Woodland, as well as the UC Davis campus and unincorporated areas of the county. The program is supported through contracts with partner cities and licensing fees.

But animal welfare activists have long contended that the Woodland shelter euthanizes far too many animals, with estimates of close to 30 percent of all dogs brought to the shelter and nearly 70 percent of cats being euthanized.

The Yolo County Pet Animal Welfare Society has called for a separation of animal services from the Sheriff's Department and a countywide commitment to a 90 percent live release rate.

On Tuesday, Tammie Murrell, a former deputy police chief in Stockton and one of the authors of the report, told supervisors that while "Yolo County Animal Services is doing a really good job with the resources they have ... as part of the Sheriff's Department, animal services competes with other public safety concerns. Coming from law enforcement, I certainly understand that.

"What's needed is an organization whose primary function is animal welfare," she said, adding that formation of a joint powers authority would be the way to go.

Other recommendations in the report included the creation of a licensing unit that aggressively pursues compliance; establishing a low-cost spay/neuter program; increasing education and outreach and building a new animal shelter.

“There are a lot of good things in this report that I’m very excited about and interested in pursuing,” said Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis. “This is a very good step for us.”

He sounded a note of caution as well, though, noting that “there is a proliferation of joint powers authorities right now and we do need to be mindful of how those work. Appropriate oversight is going to be very important.”

Also of concern to supervisors was how the transition would be made.

“How do we deal with the employee issues?” asked Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland.

County Administrator Patrick Blacklock said his office had met and would continue to meet with Sheriff’s Department staff to work out how a transition from department employees to private shelter staff would happen.

Blacklock said after all of LAFCO’s member cities have been briefed on the recommendations in the report, “we will work on the next steps.”

However it is done, Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis stressed the importance of action.

“I can’t live with a kill rate of 50 percent or anything that is short of the best possible survival rate,” he said. “We have a moral obligation to not be in the business of killing dogs and cats.”

Provenza added that he has concerns about some of the report’s recommendations, including the sustainability of relying on private donors and volunteers to keep a nongovernment shelter running, but said, “I have confidence that it can work. The will is out there (and) it’s our obligation to do this.”