

County animal shelter to close

Lane County's administrator plans to end animal services come June

By Matt Cooper The Register-Guard

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Paul Carter/The Register-Guard

Two-year-old Lilly Irish meets a puppy at Lane County Animal Services' shelter. The county has established a plan to close the facility.

The uncertainty of federal funding for Lane County government has claimed the first victims in the annual budget process: Unowned dogs, cats and other animals, which may not have a county shelter come June.

The county will close the shelter next month as one of the cost-cutting steps necessary in bracing for a possible loss of \$47 million in annual federal timber funding in the fiscal year starting July 1, County Administrator Jeff Spartz said Friday. Eugene and Springfield officials will huddle quickly on alternatives to the shelter — which they partially fund. A member of the county's own budget committee said the closure is "premature."

County officials have called animal services among the most important to citizens, and in response to public pressure the shelter in recent months had been trying to save more dogs and cats rather than euthanize them.

But without the federal money, the county must cut services including jail beds, sheriff's patrol and prosecution, and there simply isn't enough money to run the shelter, Spartz said.

The county in early May will move animals to other facilities, close cattery intake services and impound only those animals that must be euthanized for medical reasons. By the end of the month, the county will end all community animal services and discontinue response to dangerous situations.

Program Manager Mike Wellington said the county and local animal groups are placing the shelter's 125-plus dogs and cats in homes or humane societies throughout the state, and that none of the animals will be put down.

With the shelter's closure, Wellington urged pet owners to inoculate animals and take caution when approached by stray dogs.

"My biggest concern would be the safety and health of the citizens," he said.

The county must close the shelter now to complete the process before the start of a new budget year July 1, Spartz said.

But whether the county will receive more federal timber money remains unclear. Congress has yet to decide whether to renew the payments, which support the shelter and other county services in the general fund.

The federal government traditionally has distributed the aid each year to hundreds of rural counties nationwide that have tracts of federal forestland. Oregon's lawmakers have said they are working to renew the payments.

Aside from the uncertainty of the federal funding, the county's budget committee and board of commissioners have not yet signed off on closure of the shelter and other cuts that Spartz proposes for the 2008-2009 fiscal year.

Scott Bartlett, a longtime member of the committee and strong supporter of the shelter, said the closure is premature because the committee hasn't reviewed the proposed cuts and the community hasn't weighed in.

There could be options to keep the shelter open, including increased funding from the city of Eugene or a cut in county manpower hours, Bartlett said.

“Even if we have to lower (county spending on the shelter) and Eugene must come up with some more money, we should at least keep the doors open,” Bartlett said. “Why would dogs and cats have to be the sacrificial lambs?”

The county shelter, launched in 1976, has about 15 employees and an annual budget of \$1.8 million.

The shelter will receive about 5,000 dogs and cats this year from the areas it serves, Wellington said: Eugene, Springfield, Veneta and unincorporated Lane County.

Many of those animals come from Eugene, which pays the county \$820,000 annually for animal housing and other services. The county impounded about 475 dogs and 675 cats during the first half of this fiscal year, city Finance Director Dee Ann Raile said.

Springfield pays \$45,000 annually to house dogs. The city’s animal control officer might deliver as many as 20 dogs a month during busy times, and that doesn’t count the dogs that citizens deliver, said Mike Harman, services bureau manager.

Officials from the local governments will meet on options in the coming weeks. But Raile said that as Eugene plans its own spending for the coming fiscal year, the importance of animal control must be weighed against other cuts.

“You can’t look at animal control in isolation of the entire picture,” Raile said.

For more information, call Lane County Animal Services at 682-3645.

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