

## **Keep focus on animals: Activists and shelter should note common goals** **A Register-Guard Editorial**

Published: Friday, September 21, 2007

A task force has given the Lane County Animal Regulation Authority a promising road map showing how to deal with the complex and challenging issues of animal overpopulation and shelter euthanasia.

The task force, appointed earlier this year by the Lane County Board of Commissioners, rightly points out that improvements to the county's animal care and control system will depend on increased community involvement, new revenue sources, improved cooperation among governmental agencies, expansion of kennel capacity and a major revision of the county's animal control regulations.

It will require all those things - but more importantly it will require increased cooperation and trust between county animal regulation officials and animal welfare advocates, groups that too often are antagonists rather than allies.

This adversarial relationship has been particularly evident in the area of euthanasia, which understandably inflames the emotions of animal welfare activists. Last year, the shelter put down nearly 300 of the 2,000 dogs it received - and slightly more than half of the 1,600 cats.

Animal regulation officials insist they're doing the best they can, given time and facility constraints and the flood of animals coming into the shelter. They also say critics have been unrealistic in dismissing the difficulties of finding homes for animals that many regard as undesirable and in not acknowledging the limited resources available to the agency.

Animal welfare advocates say that the euthanasia numbers are unacceptable and that the shelter is not doing all it can to ensure that more dogs and cats are adopted and not put down. As task force Co-chairwoman Molly Sargent puts it, "You can sway statistics any way you want. (The county shelter) is what I would consider a 'catch-and-kill' facility. It should be run with the thought of trying to save every adoptable animal that comes into that shelter."

If the task force's recommendations are to have a chance of succeeding, both sides must recognize that their goals are the same: reducing the number of abandoned and stray animals, increasing the number of animal adoptions and improving conditions for animals.

Animal welfare activists should also acknowledge the difficulties faced by shelter officials. They do their best with frustratingly finite resources to run a "catch-and-save" facility and euthanize animals only when there is no viable alternative.

Now, the task force has made a series of thoughtful recommendations that could significantly improve the situation at the shelter. They include establishment of a written euthanasia policy and a panel to oversee which animals should be put down; better shelter hours for the public; more foster families; trap-neuter-release programs for feral cats; relaxed county limits on companion animals; expanded adoption programs - and even a new name for the agency: Lane County Animal Services.

After Wednesday's release of the task force report, shelter manager Mike Wellington assumed a defensive posture that is more likely to alienate animal welfare advocates than promote cooperation. Instead of finding common ground, Wellington defended the shelter's euthanasia rate and said a review panel is unnecessary. He even suggested that the broader community doesn't support the recommendations of animal welfare advocates on the task force, a conclusion that he failed to back up with any solid evidence.

Wellington should heed the words of county Board Chairman Faye Stewart, who says animal welfare is a top-tier issue for county residents. "Out of the three years I've been a commissioner, we've had more public input, more public involvement (on this issue) than on any other," Stewart said.

"We need to do a better job to make people feel good (about county animal services)."

And both shelter officials and animal advocates would do well to heed the words of Carl Friedman, the director of the San Francisco Department of Animal Care and Control, who recently observed that "those communities that generally don't have a good (adoption) rate are those where everybody's too busy fighting with each other to work together to save the lives of animals."