

Notes from the Animal Task Force Structure Committee Meeting, February 14th, 2012

The Structure Committee discussed three items at its meeting, the Animal Advisory Council, the position of Rescue Coordinator at the shelter, and the possibility of the shelter's hiring a full-time vet, rather than using on-call services.

Animal Advisory Council

Much of our time was spent discussing the Animal Advisory Council. The Council as it is currently organized does not appear to be an effective organization. Council members, while nominally appointed by the Board of Commissioners, are nominated by the various advisory groups. In addition, the process of having to send all communications through Animal Control limits the ability of the Council to communicate with the BOC.

In their proposed rewrite of the AAC's bylaws, there is an effort to solve some of these problems. The BOC would have the opportunity to appoint members to the Council, and the requirement that recommendations go 'up the chain' to the BOC is eliminated. This would be an improvement; however the Structure Committee does not believe that the proposed changes are the proper remedy.

We believe that the AAC should become more like the other advisory boards formed by the Commissioners, such as the Tree Advisory Committee, the Gwinnett Transit Advisory Board and others. These boards serve as an interface between the BOC, relevant staff and the public.

The current council's composition and a majority of the proposed council's composition under the new bylaws are composed of members of various animal advocate groups. It is the Structure Committee's opinion that this composition limits the ability of regular citizens to make their voice heard with respect to animal issues.

We therefore recommend that the Animal Advisory Council should consist of five members, with each Commissioner having one appointment to the Council. Appointments should be at the discretion of each Commissioner. The Council should continue to meet at least once quarterly. Members of the AAC should have the ability to communicate with both the BOC and the staff at the Animal Welfare Center as needed to determine issues and concerns that should be discussed at their meetings. Concerns and issues brought up by the public, staff or BOC members should be investigated, and findings sent to the BOC for further consideration.

We further discussed what role the various animal groups should have, given that they would no longer have a formal voice inside the AAC. These groups are largely privately funded, and operate independently of the activities of the Animal Welfare Center. We recognize that these groups play an important role in promoting the welfare of animals in the county.

We recommend that members of these groups should consider forming a separate advocacy council to promote their interests and spread their message. This separate council would not be an official County

board, and would have no formal relationship with the county or the Animal Welfare Center. In this sense, it would operate similarly to the way Gwinnett Coalition of Health and Human Services does by providing a central voice and 'go-to' group for human services efforts in the county, the way Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful advocates for environmental issues, or the way ArtWorks Gwinnett promotes arts and culture.

The council could give animal advocates a stronger voice in advocating private efforts and financial contributions on behalf of animal welfare. By incorporating as a 501-C3 nonprofit group, it could accept charitable donations from citizens and others concerned about animal welfare. The council could express its opinions to the Animal Advisory Council and/or the Board of Commissioners. At some point, and if funding allowed, a unified council could apply and receive a grant from the county to further its efforts in promoting animal welfare.

Rescue Coordinator

We briefly discussed the role of the Rescue Coordinator at the Animal Welfare Center. In addition to working with animal rescue groups, the Rescue Coordinator spends part of his time working with the animals, helping with customer service, and performing other duties in the shelter.

Our initial thinking is that if the Rescue Coordinator's position was redefined such that the position was no longer responsible for doing anything other than working with rescue groups, then other shelter employees would then have to do the work the coordinator currently performs. This would result either in the need for additional staff to cover the load, or reduced customer service / less attention to the animals at the shelter.

For that reason, we are not considering such a change at the moment, although this could change as we further examine shelter organization.

On-Staff Veterinarian

We examined pages from a PowerPoint presentation given to us by Lt. Respass which show cost savings that could be achieved by bringing a veterinarian on staff at the Animal Welfare Center. While hiring a veterinarian and a vet tech would increase expenses, the expense of paying for outside vet services would go away. Additional revenue would be raised by charging shelter customers for spay/neuter services.

We believe that bringing in an on-staff vet would not be appropriate. Most of the savings in total expenses would be achieved by offering spay-neuter services currently being performed by private vets in the county. We also note that there are a number of low-cost spay-neuter clinics operating in the county that serve customers with less ability to pay, and that many vets donate some of their services to provide low-cost alternatives to those in need.

This discussion also brought up the topic of requiring animals to be spayed or neutered before they could leave the shelter, both for adoptions and reclaims. By and large, we think that this would be a

good requirement, and this goal could be met easier by having a vet on staff. However, having an on-staff vet is not a requirement for accomplishing this goal.

We also note the potential moral hazard in which people could abuse the system in order to get a low-cost spay-neuter for their pet. Such a policy change should be carefully considered