

No Room at the Shelter

Increase in agency save rate results in congestion at county animal shelters

By Nick Marnell



Mike Kotin with his dog, Ollie

Photo Nick Marnell

Due to an overload of animals, the Contra Costa County Animal Services Department temporarily stopped accepting owner surrendered animals at the Martinez and Pinole shelters Feb. 3. The agency also indefinitely closed its night surrender boxes.

The policy change comes as the department live release rate climbed

from 46 percent in 2011 to over 75 percent last year, according to agency representative Steve Bardo. "When you do that, you're going to run into space issues," he said.

The more animals that are surrendered, the more overpopulated the shelters become and the more likely the animals will experience medical and behavioral problems, noted Beth

Ward, county animal services director. The healthier the shelter inventories, the better the likelihood the animals will find a good home.

The freeze will remain in effect for approximately one month. "After 30 days, we plan to have a stronger intervention program in place," said Ward. A key element of the intervention strategy was the hiring of Kathy Anderson as the new adoption and intake coordinator in January. Anderson will help develop a program to help families keep their animals in their homes.

Ward gave an example of a department intervention. "An owner of an unruly dog may not be able to afford to send it to obedience school," she said. "Using our donation funds, we would be able to provide a schol-

arship for the dog's training."

In addition to implementing the intervention program, the department is pushing to speed up the spay and neutering process, which should also alleviate kennel congestion. "It used to take three or four days of waiting before you could take home your animal," said Ward. "We are working to complete the spay and neuter process so people can take their pets home immediately."

Folks at the Moraga Dog Park questioned the temporary policy change and its desired outcome. "I hate to see that," said Joe Udliner, Orinda owner of an adopted German shepherd. "They should make room, maybe rent extra space."

Erin Kalvass of Lafayette, exercising her German shepherd, sounded

even more skeptical. "I don't think it's going to change anything," she said. "Sadly, the animals will probably be abandoned on the street."

"Their vision is more advanced than mine is," said Chris Seeger of Orinda, implying that the department goal to increase public education and awareness is accurate. Mike Kotin of Lafayette said that he was in favor of any policy that will result in the killing of fewer animals.

"We're trying to do everything we can to save lives," said Ward.

Despite the unprecedented intake freeze on owner surrendered animals, the agency will continue to accept sick, injured or abandoned animals, as well as strays and confiscated or impounded animals.

Of Life and Limb

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A damaged power pole after recent storms

Photo Cathy Dausman

Combine heavy winds with rain saturated ground and affected trees can easily be blown over, he said. "Pines and eucalyptus are evergreens; they just get so wet and heavy," they end up falling over, Turner said.

He's noticed a lot of dead pine as well as major die back on birch trees. The non-native birch trees, Turner said, are usually planted in the middle of a resident's lawn and become "spoiled" expecting the amount of water needed to keep the lawn green.

When homeowners start cutting back on keeping their lawns green, the trees suffered. Turner says it's more likely that trees have been improperly cared for over time. Oak trees suffering from crown rot fungus, for example, will decay over a period of 20 years. If a pine tree has red needles on it, though, Turner says the tree must come down. Business is "crazy" right now, but some of that is just seasonal work - arborists generally tackle dormant pruning during the winter season.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Battalion Chief Sean Perkins agrees with Turner.

Perkins says he's seen "nothing out of the ordinary," when it comes to falling trees, weather and

rain notwithstanding. If a fallen tree has taken a power line down with it, Perkins reminds Lamorindans to "stay away and call PG&E," and never assume the lines are dead. If the lines are arcing, call 911. "We'll send an engine out to isolate the area and leave a crew at the site until PG&E arrives. If there's a big storm with multiple (downed trees and power line) calls, we'll flag the area with caution tape," he says.

Trees and power lines can be a dangerous combination, says PG&E spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian. "We see the most uprooting when there's not much time between storms," she says, especially when conditions are windy. "On any given day, 650 contract tree crews are working ... to clear vegetation from around lines and identify hazardous trees that could come into contact with overhead power lines and potentially cause outages or spark fires," she says. PG&E uses aerial mounted technology to identify dead or dying trees for removal, Sarkissian says; she reminds everyone "if you see damaged power lines and electric equipment, call 911 and then electric PG&E at 1-800-743- 5002."

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