



Volunteers
caring for
bunnies
at the
Santa Barbara
County
Animal Shelter

February 9, 2016

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
105 E. Anapamu Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Re: Santa Barbara County Animal Services Oversight Team
and Governance Issues
Hearing on February 16, 2016

Dear Chairman Adam and Honorable Supervisors:

This letter is submitted on behalf of Bunnies Urgently Needing Shelter (BUNS), a member of the Animal Services Oversight Team appointed to evaluate recommendations received from the American Humane Association (AHA). BUNS also supports comments being jointly submitted under separate cover by additional members of the Oversight Team. We add these slightly more detailed comments and suggestions for your consideration at the February 16, 2016 hearing on progress of the Oversight Team and governance options for Santa Barbara County Animal Services (SBCAS).

GOVERNANCE

For reasons that are still unclear, the Oversight Committee was not allowed to discuss "governance" issues concerning SBCAS. We believe this was a mistake, but one that can be rectified by open public discussion before the Board and in future meetings of the Oversight Team.

Of the governance options referenced in the AHA report, only continued County management of Animal Services, with some important revisions, appears viable. While Santa Barbara County is blessed with several respected private non-profit humane societies (Santa Maria, Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez Valley), none are interested in taking over management of County facilities. There are also no state or national organizations (non-profit or otherwise) that are likely to be interested. However, we do believe that a significant change in the Animal Services governance structure is both desirable and necessary if SBCAS is to maximize levels of services for animals and the public without major ongoing increases in budget requirements. Part of the solution is delegation of responsibilities for animal care and adoption services through MOUs with responsible independent non-profits such as BUNS and

B.U.N.S.

PO Box 91452
Santa Barbara
California
93190-1452

Phone: (805) 683-0521

Fax: (805) 964-1907

ASAP. On a county-wide basis, the most important change that should be made is to create and empower a permanent Animal Commission or similar body to provide policy guidance and oversight to SBCAS. This body should also be responsible for monitoring compliance and ensure accountability of SBCAS and partnering organizations, and for mediating and resolving conflicts between SBCAS, interested stakeholders, and members of the public without unnecessary involvement of the Board of Supervisors and Public Health senior management.

The oversight body should be representative of all interested County residents. As we march through the Oversight Team process, it has become clear that implementing all the constructive recommendations in the AHA report and achieving the best level of service for animals and the general public will require ongoing partnership efforts between SBCAS, volunteers and the many non-profit organizations working for animals both inside and outside County shelters. The Oversight Team process has been a very good start towards achieving these goals and restoring public trust and accountability for SBCAS. We believe that continuation of this work, with perhaps a slightly more streamlined body, is necessary to ensure that the benefits are permanent. A number of possible models for such an oversight body are available in other jurisdictions. BUNS recommends that the Board direct Public Health staff to commence an evaluation of potential models for a permanent oversight body as part of the Oversight Team process, and report back to the Board with recommendations and alternatives within some reasonable time, perhaps three months.

BUNS/ASAP MOUs

Consistent with the AHA recommendations, we have been promised by Public Health that the Oversight Team process will result in Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with BUNS and ASAP defining our relationship with SBCAS. What we don't know yet is whether BUNS and SBCAS have the same expectations regarding the terms of the MOUs. To make it clear, BUNS and our friends in ASAP have functioned for many years essentially as independent contractors with virtually complete responsibility for care and adoptions of rabbits, guinea pigs and cats at the Santa Barbara Shelter. We expect that the MOUs will respect this independent status, while guaranteeing that BUNS and ASAP continue to provide the same high level of service to impounded animals and to members of the public visiting the cat and rabbit areas in the Shelter. In addition, we believe the MOUs should address issues of costs more equitably than has been done in the past.

BUNS remains committed to ensuring that rabbits and guinea pigs receive the highest quality of care and adoption opportunities. What we recommend to expedite the MOU process at this time is that the Board direct BUNS and ASAP to submit their proposed MOU's to Public Health in early March, so that meaningful discussion of final details can proceed rapidly, and fully negotiated MOUs be returned to the Board for approval as soon as possible.

OVERSIGHT TEAM PROGRESS

BUNS strongly supports the ongoing activities of the Oversight Team. We believe that the solution to all issues involved in animal services in the County depends upon the collaboration of SBCAS and the many non-profit organizations and individual volunteers who come together to provide care and support for all species of animals in need. The Oversight Team has proven to be an excellent representative body bringing County staff together with many of the most knowledgeable and experienced members of the animal community to solve ongoing problems.

At the same time, it is now clear that the evaluation process undertaken by the Oversight Team is going to be a long one. To date the Oversight Team has addressed issues that were amenable

to consensus decisions, i.e. approval of non-controversial common sense AHA recommendations, and unanimous rejection of AHA recommendations that were clearly unworkable or counterproductive for Santa Barbara County. The Oversight Team has just now seriously begun the task of addressing major policy and operational issues that require more detailed analysis and discussion. Much of this discussion will be conducted by subcommittees which will report back with their recommendations to the Oversight Team as a whole for final discussion and recommendations. To complete all these tasks without exhausting the members will take many more months. At some point it will be appropriate to pass ongoing oversight responsibilities to a permanent oversight body, as discussed above.

RECOMMENDED INTERIM ACTIONS

The Board should be aware that while the Oversight Team continues its work, operational issues continue to arise at the individual shelter level. At times there also appears to be a lack of clear understanding as to which AHA recommendations have been accepted, which are still under discussion, and what policies and practices shelter staff and volunteers should follow in the interim. Discussion of some of these operational issues has repeatedly cropped up in Oversight Team meetings, which makes it more difficult to concentrate on the Oversight Team's true County-wide mission. To resolve the foregoing interim issues, BUNS suggests the following:

- Greater communication between SBCAS senior management, shelter supervisors and shelter staff regarding progress and outcomes at Oversight Team meetings. Obviously SBCAS staff at all levels are vital to the long-term success of reform plans, and should be kept informed and welcome to submit comments through Oversight Team representatives.
- Initiate a separate meeting process for resolving current operational level problems (primarily concerning dogs) at the Santa Barbara Shelter. This would allow problems to be resolved without consuming Oversight Team time or the time of north county representatives who are not affected by these issues.
- Complete the BUNS and ASAP MOUs, and proceed with MOUS for all other partnering organizations.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and recommendations. BUNS representatives will be present at the February 16 hearing to respond to any questions on these issues.

Sincerely,



Philip A. Seymour
BUNS Oversight Team Representative