



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## **Animal shelter stops intakes, raising officials' hackles**

**By Andrew Oxford**

*The Taos News, 7/30/2015*

Call it taking a stand or a reckless political ploy but the board of Stray Heart Animal Shelter forced the issue of funding for animal welfare onto the agenda of local governments this week when it announced Monday (July 27) the facility will no longer accept dogs or cats and laid off 15 employees.

Board members said the shelter is beyond capacity and that neither the town nor county are doing enough to address underlying animal welfare issues while paying too little for care provided by the organization.

County officials, meanwhile, questioned how Stray Hearts is spending the tax dollars it already receives — \$12,000 from the county and \$8,000 from the town each month.

The brinksmanship this week raised questions, too, about the future of a shelter that critics have said is mired in mismanagement but that boosters claim is finally moving beyond past financial and political problems. And it left the community to confront the question of how to deal with its stray animal population without euthanizing more dogs and cats.

### **Full**

The executive director of Stray Hearts notified county leaders in a letter Monday afternoon the shelter would suspend intakes of new animals until the facility's population is reduced to "appropriate numbers."

The shelter was housing 119 dogs and puppies despite having capacity for 80, according to the letter from Executive Director Harvey Yocum. Seventy-eight cats and kittens were also housed at the facility despite having a capacity for only 60, he wrote.

Yocum said intakes have spiked approximately 150 percent over the last year, leaving the shelter unable to keep pace even as adoptions have increased and the average time animals spend in the shelter has fallen.

While the shelter is not housing two dogs to a cage, it has been housing some canines outdoors, he said.

The executive director expressed concern, too, that a new animal ordinance expected to be voted on by the Taos County Board of Commissioners Aug. 18 could lead to another spike in intakes.

The draft includes requirements that domestic animals be licensed and microchipped, all at costs Yocum said many local residents will not choose to pay.

In addition to suspending intakes, the shelter also announced the termination of 15 staff, though initial plans called for laying off as many as 17 employees, which would have left the facility with nine personnel.

The shelter also cut office hours to between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., suspended public vaccinations and reduced the hours of its veterinarian.

The announcement came as a surprise to local law enforcement and county officials, who said they were not provided advance notice.

The shelter continues to care for dogs and cats in its custody and accept animals from law enforcement but local officials indicated they are searching for an alternative.

Taos County Manager Stephen Archuleta said Monday afternoon he was shocked by the announcement, arguing the shelter was in violation of its contract with the county government.

"I do think it's a political move," he said.

County officials have been exploring options to provide more funding to the shelter, including a tax, according to Archuleta. Meanwhile, town officials have considered providing land for construction of a new shelter that might allow it to move out of the nonprofit's mortgaged facility, he added.

Archuleta did not dispute the draft animal ordinance may prompt a short-term spike in local residents dumping dogs and cats but maintained it would lead to a reduction in the stray population over time.

"It's a little alarming to hear [Yocum] making these allegations when he was involved in the drafting of that ordinance," Archuleta said.

"If they're trying to strongarm money from the town and county, this is not the way to go about it," he added.

In his letter to county officials, however, Yocum said the move was "purely a business decision."

"Currently, the county provides funding for only 22.7 percent of our operational costs and we can no longer operate at the same level of service without an increase in revenue from our contracts and major cost reductions," he wrote. In an interview, Yocum said the shelter has a monthly operating budget of approximately \$57,000, of which \$20,000 comes from local governments.

The nonprofit's most recent tax documents concern finances during 2013, indicating \$523,602 in expenses that year and \$607,954 in revenue. The shelter lost money in 2012 with \$529,309 in revenue and \$562,457 in expenses.

The shelter employed 27 staff during 2013 and paid its then-executive director \$43,192, according to documents filed with the Internal Revenue Service.

The town and county governments have contracted with Stray Hearts since 2004, according to Yocum. The amounts paid by each government have increased by a combined \$1,000 monthly, he said.

Yocum argued that has not been enough to keep pace with the organization's expenses and that donors are unwilling to continue paying for what they believe to be the legal responsibility of local governments.

### **A new era**

The shelter's board and executive director have portrayed Monday's announcement not just as a stand for more funding, though, but also as an effort to move Stray Hearts into a new era.

By suspending intakes, the board indicated it hoped to force county and town leaders back to negotiations over contracts, which have each been extended temporarily.

When Yocum was tapped as executive director in November and several new members joined the nonprofit's board of directors, it was emerging from a year of internal political tumult that included its veterinarian having his license suspended and board members resigning en masse.

An inspection by state authorities in November is said to have gone poorly and almost led to the shelter being closed altogether.

But as the animal welfare community appears to have moved on from the feud that led to the departure of Yocum's predecessor, the shelter has been praised by the town manager as well as other local leaders as improving conditions for its dogs and cats.

Nonetheless, local leaders indicated after Monday's announcement they are still skeptical of the nonprofit's financial stewardship.

In an email to constituents Monday evening, the chairman of the Taos County Board of Commissioners questioned "ballooning staff costs."

Salaries and wages have increased 40 percent over the last two years, Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn wrote.

The shelter is also facing a looming mortgage payment of more than \$200,000, he noted.

Yocum said during a public forum Thursday evening the shelter's property on St. Francis Lane was mortgaged approximately five years ago by previous board members. The mortgage was seen as a temporary means of paying lenders, he said.

A major payment was due last September but the shelter was granted a one-year extension, according to Yocum, adding the shelter may have the option of paying off the loan over several years but at a cost of \$5,000 per month.

Will local taxpayers foot a bigger share of that bill?

County officials are questioning whether they are getting a good deal as it is.

Archuleta said other counties pay much lower costs through contracts with their local animal shelters.

Funding from local governments accounts for approximately 6 percent of the Santa Fe Animal Shelter and Humane Society's budget, according to administrators.

Officials at the Espanola Valley Humane Society said they are typically not reimbursed the total cost of caring for an animal.

However, some local governments such as the city of Farmington cover virtually the entire cost of their animal welfare obligations by operating their shelter as a municipal department.

### **Making room**

County officials concede they have had little insight into how the shelter spends its money.

Archuleta said he has not seen financial documents from Stray Hearts. The organization has not been asked to produce any, he added.

But the shelter's board argues it should not be treated as a charity with its hand out, however, but be paid for the real cost of the services it provides.

Blankenhorn suggested in his email to constituents Monday evening the shelter may itself be to blame for overcrowding.

"Most people who I talk to in our community agree that euthanasia can be less cruel than keeping an animal in a cage in an overcrowded shelter for long periods," he wrote.

The shelter's board refuses to euthanize animals purely for the sake of space.

Blankenhorn argued, however, the shelter cannot make that decision on its own "when asking for public money, and as stewards of that money, commissioners must have that debate."

Or as Archuleta put it, "they cannot rehabilitate every animal."

The question, then, is not just whether Stray Hearts should receive more money through its contracts with the town and county but whether local residents are willing to pay to give more animals a chance.

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Katharine Egli

Vincent Corral, 11, plays with kittens in the Stray Hearts Animal Shelters cattery.

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Katharine Egli

Samson, a 1-year-old retriever/golden mix, photographed Tuesday (July 28) was brought to Stray Hearts Animal Shelter in poor condition. The shelter has stopped general intakes due to over-crowding.