

Town seeks funds for new animal shelter

By Andrew Oxford

The Taos News, 1/21/2016

The town of Taos is asking New Mexico lawmakers to throw it a bone this session by providing \$150,000 for the design and construction of a new animal shelter.

The Humane Society of Taos, which operates Stray Hearts Animal Shelter, would run the new facility, according to Town Manager Rick Bellis.

But local officials agree a more efficient shelter would help contain the costs of housing animals, he said.

According to Stray Hearts Executive Director Harvey Yocum, the existing facility off Salazar Road is both inefficient and too small for the nonprofit organization's current needs.

Stray Hearts Animal Shelter was renovated in 2004 with financial support from the Taos Community Foundation.

The facility was designed for 30 animals, but the construction of several greenhouse structures has expanded capacity to 90 dogs and 70 cats.

Yet the pods, as staff and volunteers refer to the buildings, are not energy efficient, according to Yocum.

"Our carbon footprint has to be pretty ugly," he says. "The amount of air we're blasting out of those pods is ridiculous."

Utilities have proven to be a major expense for the nonprofit, Yocum adds, describing the heating and cooling system as insufficient.

A mortgage on the property has also proven to be a burden for Stray Hearts, which has struggled financially.

The facility's design is also inefficient for staff, he says.

The daily task of cleaning kennels requires leashing and moving around dogs.

A state-of-the-art shelter would include kennels separated by gates, allowing a dog to inhabit one side while staff clean the other, without having to move animals.

Providing on-site spay and neuter services will also require more space, Yocum said, as the facility's clinic will need more room for pre- and post-operation procedures.

Given the needs, Yocum said it would be better to build a new facility rather than invest substantial sums in the existing buildings.

Even if the Legislature does not approve funding this session, Bellis indicated the town might still advance the project by providing land. He said the town council has considered three sites for the new shelter: one near the Taos Regional Airport and two locations in town.

The town would own the shelter and issue a request for proposals for an organization to operate it. With ownership of the facility, Bellis suggested local governments could assist to a greater extent with maintenance and upkeep.

If state lawmakers grant the initial request for \$150,000, Bellis said the project would begin with a feasibility study. Remaining funds could be used to begin construction, he said, expressing confidence many materials could be obtained at little cost through federal surplus programs.

The proposal comes as the town and county governments negotiate with Stray Hearts on a long-term contract for providing animal welfare services. Under contracts that expired New Year's Eve, the governments paid Stray Hearts a combined \$20,000 each month. The shelter is seeking an additional fee for each animal to help cover the cost of care in addition to operational expenses. But it has been a tough sell for local governments. Meanwhile, the county has poured more money into spay and neuter services in a bid to reduce the area's stray animal population.

Bellis indicated both governments have reached a short-term agreement with the shelter and will continue contract negotiations.

Funding for the shelter is one of three priorities town officials identified as priorities for the legislative session that began Tuesday. Town officials are also seeking \$800,000 to resurface Salazar Road as well as \$75,000 to design a regional fire and public safety training facility.

