

## County mulls over new animal shelter

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While the relationship between Taos County and Stray Hearts, the local animal shelter, has been strained and tumultuous, the contract between the two bodies was renewed for another six months.

The Stray Hearts contract expired at the end of 2015. A five-month contract wasn't approved until February. An extension approved June 28 will carry the county through the end of 2016.

As part of negotiations, the amount of the contract was increased by nearly 20 percent, at \$86,400 for six months (\$14,400 a month), up from about \$72,000 for six months, according to County Manager Leandro Cordova.

"We've heard over and over 'increased costs' [from Stray Hearts], and we're going to take them at their word. But we're going to have to verify that by basically policing this contract," Cordova said.

The contract extension is the most recent installment in a prolonged drama.

"I'm tired of this issue coming back up every six months," said County Commissioner Candyce O'Donnell, District V.

The extension is "winding down our relationship with Stray Hearts," said Cordova, but added six months is a long enough time frame to see whether or not their relationship "goes in a good and positive direction."

The extension comes at the same time the county and town are floating the idea of opening their own animal shelter.

That idea is "past its infancy, but still in the adolescence stage," Cordova recently told *The Taos News*. "I have a lot of work and research to do before I propose the idea formally."

Harvey Yocum, executive director for Stray Hearts, told *The Taos News* that the cost of the contract is directly determined by the requirements requested by local governments. "All this hubbub comes up because we asked for more money and [the county] thinks they're paying too much," Yocum said.

Yocum said that should Taos County pursue opening its own animal shelter, he thinks the financial reality is going to set in quickly. "It costs millions and millions to build a shelter. We will support the town and county in whatever direction they want to go, but we'll continue to do our job until such time as they come up with another alternative," he said.

Both Yocum and Cordova told *The Taos News* that communication has been a consistent issue in their negotiations.

“The county has made it difficult to talk to them unless it’s in a formal setting,” said Yocum. He said work-study sessions — where government officials can meet to talk through issues without violating the Open Meetings Act — are an “awesome opportunity” to get on the same page.

While sheltering animals is mostly the domain of Stray Hearts, addressing the root cause of too many animals in Taos County — a lack of comprehensive spaying and neutering programs — is divvied up among Stray Hearts, local governments, vets and a variety of local and regional nonprofits.

Audra Scully, organizer of Planned Pethood, a group dedicated to reducing the pet population in Taos County, said at a July 5 county commissioners meeting that getting a pet spayed or neutered has “become a logistical nightmare for people.”

People looking for low-cost or free spay-neuter services get “ping-ponged” around to those different nonprofits or even end up going to Santa Fe or Espa-ola, she said.

“The more hoops you have to jump through, the less they are likely to do it,” she said.

Scully advocated for a spay-neuter clinic in Taos that could serve the whole community and be a simple one-stop shop, similar to what is available in Santa Fe and Rio Arriba counties.

Stray Hearts is equipped with the space and equipment needed to operate a fulltime spay-neuter clinic, but a licensed, full-time vet is also required — something Yocum says doesn’t make financial sense compared to the patchwork of options the public and Stray Hearts uses now.

Stray Hearts uses both the Santa Fe and Espa-ola shelters occasionally to spay or neuter the animals in their care, while Planned Pethood and the Taos County Sheriff’s Department occasionally host mobile clinics for the public.

Stray Hearts, Yocum said, spent 2014 and 2015 improving the shelter itself — making upgrades and improving the quality of care for animals in their care. Since the beginning of 2016, he said, Stray Hearts has started shifting its focus toward meeting the need of public spay-neuter programs.

Yocum told *The Taos News* he’d like for Stray Hearts to open a “two-table, full-blown, spay-neuter clinic.”

“We continue to morph and change and adapt. As we continue to find those [financial] resources, our capabilities [for spay-neuter services] will increase,” he said.