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Manatee animal advocates push for no-kill county

Statistics show county kills nearly 55% of animals that come through shelter doors

By TONI WHITT
twhitt@bradenton.com

MANATEE -- Animal advocate groups here have gotten together with the county's Animal Services department in an effort to make Manatee a no-kill county and a model for other counties in the state.



Manatee kills nearly 55 percent of all the animals that come through its shelter doors, according to statistics provided by Animal Services.

The department wants to change that and it has a coalition of volunteers, animal lovers and rescue groups to help. It plans to bring a resolution to the county commission this month to initiate the process of becoming a no-kill community and to save more lives of impounded dogs and cats.

If the county wants to achieve such an ambitious goal, it will need as much backing as it can get, officials and no-kill experts say.

Manatee is looking to cut \$8 million from an already tight budget. It's the fifth year the county has had to make cuts to its budget, and each year the cuts have gotten harder to make because they affect more and more core services.

Another factor: Counties are mandated to provide animal control services, but they are not mandated to save animals.

"We are not mandated to do the sheltering and adoption programs," said William Hutchison, director of the county's Public Safety Department, which includes Animal Services. "That goes to quality of life. We're not mandated to do it, but it is the right thing to do."

But doing the right thing has to prove to be cost-effective when the government is under scrutiny for everything it spends.

"These touchy-feely things always come under the microscope when it comes to the budget," Hutchison said.

That makes every adoption even more vital because adopted animals pay for themselves, he said.

A move to no-kill requires a community-wide effort because it would necessitate more volunteers to foster animals, and more in-kind support for medicine and medical supplies, marketing and advertising and training, animal advocates and county officials say. There would also be the need to provide more high-volume and low-cost spay and neutering services, as well as expanding the trap, neuter and release programs where there are high concentrations of feral cats.



The Humane Society of Manatee County, which supports the move to a no-kill county, offers several services. Rebecca Neal, board vice president for the Humane Society of Manatee County, said services include grant writing to help fund the county's vaccination program.

In addition, the Humane Society would provide training in counseling those who want to surrender their animals; recruiting and training volunteers to foster animals; promoting, recruiting and training volunteers and assisting the Gulf Shore Animal League with their trap, neuter and release program for feral cats.

The Humane Society authored the Community Strategic Plan to achieve no-kill in Manatee. The plan calls for the euthanasia rate to be reduced to no more than 25 percent. Eventually it would like to get it below 10 percent. To get there the county is working toward building a better reputation for Animal Services. That began with a change within the department.

Hutchison said there has been a change in attitude over the past five years. It began with a trip to Richmond, Va., where they first met Nathan J. Winograd, who literally wrote the book on creating no-kill communities.

Five years ago, "we were just a dog pound," said Kris Weiskopf, chief of the Animal Services division. "Our whole mind-set has changed. We're not dog-catchers anymore."

Now Hutchison and Weiskopf are almost evangelical in their zeal to make the no-kill community concept a reality. "We're sort of like ex-smokers," Hutchison said with a tinge of pride.

They changed their name from Animal Control to Animal Services and they began to change the way they thought about their jobs.

After getting a black eye for adopting out a dog with parvo to an active animal rescue person who not only watched that dog die, but saw all of her other rescues get infected with the virus, the county started a program to vaccinate every animal that came in.

That vaccination program has paid dividends. The animals are healthier, the county has adopted more animals and the agency has been able to rebuild relationships and put rescuers at ease.

Last month, Weiskopf and Joel Richmond, a supervisor with Manatee County Animal Services, went to a one-day seminar on creating a no-kill community. Laurie Crawford, president of the animal network; Sue Kolze, vice president of the animal network; and Joan Peelen, a member of the Manatee County Animal Services Board, also attended Winograd's step-by-step guide for creating a no-kill community.

Peelen said she came out of the 10-hour presentation believing that Manatee could successfully become a no-kill community.



“It takes a commitment from Animal Services,” Peelen said. “Manatee County is absolutely committed. Animal Services is doing everything in its power to get animals adopted.”

The county opened a store-front adoption center on Manatee Avenue in January and has already adopted 75 animals from the tiny space. That center not only helped increase adoptions, it also brought attention to the county’s mission to adopt animals, Hutchison said.

Other county employees have even gotten involved, meandering over to the adoption center and walking dogs at lunch time. One of the employees even asked about setting up a foster program among county employees.

“I see that everyone is stepping up and committed to creating a no-kill Manatee,” Peelen said. “I have not at this moment affected the kill rate, but I believe we will. There’s a will to do that.”

Peelen, a former civil rights lawyer for the federal government, did not have any pets and never intended to get involved in animal rescue.

“I started fostering one dog at a time,” she said. “I had a lot of sick dogs. I had 15 different dogs over three years.

“I love the opportunity to have a pet, but not have a pet. I feed the dog, but everything else is paid for. If I need to go away for a period of time, I can give it back.”

Based on her own experience, “when the citizens of Manatee realize that 55 percent of the animals at the shelter are killed I think they will step up,” she said.

Peelen said the county should have little reservation about moving to the no-kill philosophy.

“If you greatly increase adoptions, you will increase revenues,” she said. “That will be welcome and saleable to Manatee county commissioners. It’s not costing money, it’s simply saving animals.”