



Tuesday, April 15, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Animal welfare can be done humanely

A million-dollar plan by King County Executive Ron Sims and the County Council offers a short-term response to King County's overwhelmed animal-welfare system.

New cat cages, dog runs, more staff and stronger efforts to decrease the number of animals euthanized relieve problems of overcrowding and lax animal care. This is only a down payment. Longer term, lawmakers ought to ponder what it would take to run a model animal-care facility and whether that is a task best left to vendors — for example, the Humane Society. Comparisons between the county's animal-shelter program and the Humane Society set up a false dichotomy. The county takes in several times as many animals. The Humane Society largely gets animals from families who can no longer care for them. The county gets stray dogs and feral cats. Also, the county is responsible for *humans* and animals, creating a constant tension for funds.

Donations made to the Animal Benefit Fund and money from the county's capital-improvement budget will pay for immediate fixes. Animal control is a neglected area of county operations, making these investments the right thing to do. But limited budgets will require greater fiscal creativity in the future than a reliance on donations.

The joint agreement last week — some call it a truce, so rancorous had the animal-care debate become — addresses a consultant's biting critique of the county's performance caring for the 12,000 animals taken in last year. Details of bone-dry water bowls, crowded conditions and a steady procession of healthy dogs and cats headed for euthanasia were distressing.

Equally distressing was the introduction of the phrase "no kill" to the animal-rights lexicon. It's an extremely misleading concept, imprecise at best.

The reality is that the county euthanized about 4,000 animals last year. Halving this number by adopting a "limited kill" policy ought to be the goal. Success depends on adopting out more animals, using foster care for short-term placements and stepping up spaying and neutering efforts.

Strengthened partnerships with the Humane Society and advocacy organizations such as PAWS can help. A set of long-range proposals is expected to be presented to the council by late summer.

With the initial urgency abated, the council ought to examine successful models around the country, including San Francisco and Charlottesville, Va. There is time to get this right.

Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company