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Town hall airs debate on county animal shelters

By Karen Johnson
Seattle Times staff reporter

King County residents, shelter volunteers and policymakers gathered in Burien on Monday evening to share varied and passionate thoughts on how to decrease the number of dogs and cats killed in county shelters while increasing the number of adoptions.

For many who packed the auditorium at Highline Performing Arts Center, the meeting was their first opportunity to speak out on how best to care for the county's unwanted pets.

The comments ranged from supportive to sharply critical, with many debating privatizing shelters in the area.

A group of 30 or more volunteers who work in King County shelters were especially vocal to members of the Metropolitan King County Council at the town-hall meeting.

Several said they have complained for years that area shelters needed more money and staff. Others said they disagreed with the claims made by a private consultant who was hired by the council to assess the quality of care in King County shelters.

The study, released in March by consultant Nathan Winograd, claimed the county has failed to care humanely for animals for so long that the shelters now should be run by a private entity. Winograd's report also claimed he had seen sick cats in the Kent shelter go without food or water for consecutive days.

Volunteer Jennifer Knutson defended the shelter staff members. "They are dedicated to the animals despite the stigma of working in an outdated facility," she said.

Many of the staff and animal-control officers who work for county shelters have been unfairly insulted and criticized since the release of the report, Knutson said.

Another volunteer criticized the council for spending money to hire a consultant to study the shelter while the number of county animal-control officers has dropped from 38 to 28 in the past five years.

All comments — both critical and complimentary — were invited, said County Council Chairman Dow Constantine.

"It's an opportunity to show people we're really all on the same page. We all fundamentally care for the same



JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Best Friends Animal Society holds a rally outside the Highline Performing Arts Center in Burien before the King County Council town-hall meeting on the status of the King County shelters.

thing," Constantine said.

Others spoke out in support of the county's efforts to assess its animal shelters.

State Rep. Dave Upthegrove waited in line behind community members to voice his support for the County Council's efforts the past few months.

But how the council will fix the shelter's problems is still uncertain. The biggest issue will be whether to keep the shelters under county management.

"The council is saying the old expectations are no longer acceptable," Constantine said.

In the hour before the town-hall meeting, organizers from local animal-advocacy groups such as the Best Friends Animal Society and the Humane Society held an adoption fair to encourage people to adopt orphan pets.

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