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## Let pet lovers handle animal shelters

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GUEST COLUMNIST

It's a sad day for pet lovers in King County. A scathing new report highlighted gross mismanagement at King County's two public animal shelters. The report, produced by a veterinarian team from the University of California-Berkeley, describes dire circumstances of inadequate housing, frightening living situations and understaffing. This report came after similar revelations made by consultant Nathan Winograd in his report to the King County Council last year.

Reading about the situation at those animal shelters struck me. Two months ago, I adopted Jude, a Siamese cat, from an animal shelter. During my search I visited the private, nonprofit Seattle Humane Society. The animals were well kept, happy for attention, all had food and water and the staff could quickly give us a run-down on their health and status. According to the University of California report, you would find the opposite at the county's government-run shelters. That is frightening to a pet owner.

So what are we going to do to keep animals safe in King County? The first step is to take the responsibility away from the King County government.

What makes the county government the right institution to oversee animal shelters in the first place? They have much larger obligations such as infrastructure, a criminal justice system and police services. A private group, such as the Seattle Humane Society, does a much better job of ensuring the long-term well-being of animals. I would feel better knowing pet lovers rather than politicians are in charge of homeless animals.

Privatizing King County Animal Control would benefit everyone. Studies have shown that privatizing animal shelters saves money while improving the quality of care. A Reason Foundation report found cost savings of between 10 percent and 40 percent per year from putting a private group in charge of animal care facilities. In King County, that would mean savings upward of \$200,000 per year.

With King County looking at a \$20 million shortfall this year and a \$60 million deficit next year, privatizing the county's animal shelters would help close the gap. One way for King County to do that is to subsidize a private group each year in return for handling animal control services. Grant County does that successfully.

A second option is for the county to pay a private shelter a set amount per animal to offset some of the costs associated with care of that animal. Bella Vista, Ark., uses that model, keeping an animal control officer on staff to ensure animals are kept off the streets.

A final option for the county would be to contract with a private group over five years, giving the group a decreasing subsidy each year until the contract is over. At that point, the shelter would be self-sufficient. This is a long-term solution that would free up county funds and provide consistent animal care over the long run.

Any of those options would be a huge improvement for animals in the county. Working with groups that already provide quality care for animals would go a long way toward ensuring that what happened in King County's shelters never happens again. Moreover, if the county can save \$200,000 in the process, it would be ridiculous not to put a private group in charge of animal care. It's the right solution for King County's cats, dogs and taxpayers.

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