



PAWS – by Assistant County Administrator Donna Miller

What is PAWS' relationship with the County? In 1994 the County contracted with Panhandle Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) to provide animal control. As stated in the County's animal control ordinance, 92-25:

In accordance with and pursuant to the authority of Florida Statutes Chapters 125 and 828, the Board of County Commissioners of Okaloosa County hereby establishes regulations in the interest of public health, safety and welfare to provide protection for, and to regulate and control domestic animals in Okaloosa County. The powers and authority granted under this ordinance shall be supplemental to those already provided for in Florida Statutes concerning local animal control, the regulation of dangerous animals, cruelty to animals, and the sale or transfer of dogs and cats.

Who or what is PAWS? PAWS has a website at www.paws-shelter.com that explains they are a private, non-profit organization dedicated to the welfare of animals. They are split into two divisions: 1) the Animal Services Division, headed by Director Dee Thompson, that carries out the animal control contract with the County and cities and 2) the Humane Society and Adoption Center, headed by Director Tricia Bryant, that handles a wide spectrum of services, including adoptions, microchip implants, animal rescue, lost and found services, humane education, 24 hour emergency services, and pet cremation services. Note that the County has no contract with or oversight for the Humane Society and Adoption Center, just the Animal Services Division.

Who reviews what PAWS does? PAWS has a board of directors that oversees and guides the staff members of both divisions at PAWS. This board includes three officers and nine other professionals from local businesses and organizations. In addition to their oversight and direction, the County's Assistant County Administrator and staff respond to questions, concerns and issues related to the animal control contract and the Animal Services Division's handling of that contract.

In addition, PAWS is audited annually by a certified accountant firm and provides a copy of that audit to the county. The County Clerk of Court's office recently began a thorough internal audit of PAWS' operations and processes, including the handling of fines and fees, to insure that all laws and statutes are followed. Suggestions for improved processes will likely be a result of this audit as well.

Why Contract with PAWS?

Shouldn't the County do the work in-house? Most counties and cities in the state of Florida do not contract with a local humane society to handle animal control services. This appears to be because other humane societies or animal non-profit agencies do not want to provide these services, and that leaves it up to the local governments to do the work in-house. Okaloosa County has spoken to neighboring counties and cities about the cost of providing animal control as an in-house function and it is clear that this would double the County's costs, taking costs from approximately \$400,000 per year to at least \$1,000,000.

Why Charge a Household Pet Fee and what happened to that fee?

For years the County has required that pet owners buy an annual household animal license that covers all pets residing in the household. Most recently this fee was \$10, regardless of the number of pets in the household. The revenue was used exclusively to offset the costs of providing animal control services. The license, however, was not universally collected and many citizens did not even know it existed. In fact, of the estimated 60,000 households in Okaloosa County with pets, only about 3,000 had been paying the license fee each year.

So, facing declining tax revenues, County staff advised the Board on January 8, 2008 that it would benefit the bottom line if the collection rate of this fee could be increased. In order to do that, the Board would need to endorse PAWS' use of the rabies list information they receive from veterinarians to remind owners a fee is due. For many years local veterinarians had objected to that use, saying their clients' names and addresses were confidential. The County agreed that they are confidential and was assured by PAWS that they would be kept confidential even if they sent reminders that the license fee is due. With this understanding, the Board approved the use of the information to collect the license fee.

After that meeting, Board members received a lot of citizen and veterinary comments, many of these against using the rabies list information to try to collect the fee. Some people were opposed to the fee itself, saying they pay taxes and those taxes should continue to be the source of funding for the PAWS contract. Consequently, at the February 5, 2008 Board Meeting, the Board members voted to discontinue the license fee.

What is happening with the rabies list issue?

Florida Statutes 828.30 entitled "Rabies vaccination of dogs, cats, and ferrets," requires in (3) that "Upon vaccination against rabies, the licensed veterinarian shall provide the animal control authority with a rabies vaccination certificate." The issue of whether or not local veterinarians comply with this state statute and the subsequent consequences if they choose not to is beyond the control of the County. County staff has discussed the issue with PAWS, encouraged both parties toward a resolution, and remains ready to assist as much as possible if called upon by either party.

Why is PAWS a "hot topic" now?

At the February 19, 2008 Board of County Commissioners meeting, a citizen asked the Board to respond to several concerns he has regarding PAWS. That discussion is scheduled to occur at their May 6, 2008 meeting, which will be held at Crestview City Hall beginning at 6:00 p.m.