

No webcams will be installed at new Memphis Animal Shelter

By Amos Maki

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The Memphis Animal Shelter will no longer use Web cameras when it moves to a new facility this fall.

Chief Administrative Officer George Little said in a memo sent to shelter administrator Matthew Pepper Friday that the city shares concerns workers have about their safety because of the cameras.

City employees recently filed a grievance, saying the cameras made them fear for their safety.

"While advocating for accountability and transparency within city government, I concur that the administration must also ensure that the employees of the city of Memphis are afforded the opportunity to work in a safe environment," Little said in the memo.

The cameras, installed after a raid by law enforcement officials at the shelter in October 2009, snap a photo every 15 seconds. They have recorded what some interpret as inappropriate treatment of animals by employees.

Employees had asked that the Web transmissions stop immediately, but they will stay operational while the city remains in the current shelter. When the city moves to the new shelter, located at 2350 Appling City Cove, only internal security cameras will be used.

Shelter employees said they were the only workers in the city whose daily actions are broadcast on the Web, and that they had received threats as a result of the broadcasts.

"It is the union's position that this is a safety issue due to all the threats, hostility and even sexual comments made to and about the employees at the shelter online," said the grievance. "The union does support security cameras in general but does not support the webcam that is broadcast in anonymous form. In theory it was a good idea but it is now threatening employees."

After the 2009 raid, when deputies discovered that some animals in the shelter were sick or had been deprived of food and water, the facility at 3456 Tchulahoma was taken over by the Shelby County Sheriff's Office.

After the city regained control of the shelter, Mayor AC Wharton announced the installation of the 24-hour surveillance cameras with public access.

The animal shelter has been a focus of controversy this week as animal control officer Demetria Hogan appeared in General Sessions Court charged with two counts of animal cruelty. The first count involves 11-year-old male pit bull Kapone, a family pet that went missing after Hogan picked up the dog along with a 3-year-old female pit bull. The dogs had escaped from their Cordova back yard June 24. The younger dog arrived at the shelter and was picked up by its owners the next morning, but security tapes showed no signs that Kapone was checked in to the shelter.

An attorney for Hogan said the shelter employee did deliver Kapone.

"She logged that dog into the shelter. Anything else that happened, my client didn't do it," Eubanks said.

The second cruelty count against Hogan involved a dog she picked up Tuesday after it had been hit by a car. By the time Hogan delivered the dog to the animal shelter, it was dead. Investigators are looking into the possibility Hogan delayed returning to the shelter for fear she would be met by police and arrested for failing to turn herself in on the earlier cruelty case.

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