

The wrong road on animal control

Posted by Robert E. Babcock, guest opinion May 29, 2009 08:30AM

In February, a joint task force for the city of Portland and Multnomah County completed its report and recommendations outlining a "renewed approach to animal services" that has been endorsed by city Commissioner Randy Leonard and county Chairman Ted Wheeler.

Within the next few weeks, Leonard and Wheeler will be seeking to implement the recommendations. Their efforts should be opposed by anyone knowledgeable about the county's animal services policies and practices or who are concerned about the extraordinary degree to which implementation of those recommendations will intrude upon our lives.

Multnomah County Animal Services clearly needs renewal. As task force member Sharon Harmon, executive director of the Oregon Humane Society, told The Oregonian on May 10, MCAS has been in a "downward spiral" for several years and now is just a "shell" of its former status.

Harmon's characterization of the agency is sadly accurate. Over the course of the past few years (fiscal years 2003 though 2008), a period during which the total number of animals brought into the shelter increased by only 5 percent and the agency's budget increased by 50 percent (to a current \$4.6 million), nearly every measure of the agency's performance documents failure. Adoptions are down by 40 percent (dogs) and 18 percent (cats). Nearly half of the dogs not returned to owners are killed; so too are nearly two-thirds of cats. The "kill rate" is now well above rates in neighboring counties facing far more severe budget limitations. Thousands of dollars are squandered on adversarial enforcement efforts that have achieved no meaningful improvement in the public's safety. The number of animals saved by cooperating life-saving organizations and individuals, a number widely recognized as a key measure of community support, has dropped by 40 percent.

In the face of this downward spiral, the task force chose to postpone any direct inquiry into the policies and practices responsible for the decline in the public's support and, instead, simply accepted the agency's excuse that its failures were attributable to inadequate funding.

To generate more funding, the task force has recommended "rebranding" animal services by (a) converting "licensing" to "registration"; and (b) creating a "culture of compliance" intended to generate an increased rate of registration payments. The projected five-year cost of the recommendations is \$1.7 million, an amount that will be ultimately recouped only if local citizens ante up registration fees at a rate (49 percent) unequalled in any city, including those that license for free.

When one looks at the measures the task force believes necessary to create the city/county "culture of compliance," one easily understands just how much the public's support for MCAS must have declined in recent years. Only dramatic deterioration could spawn proposals as Orwellian as the following:

- (a) Assigning a broad range of city/county employees such as Water Bureau readers the task of reporting signs of possibly unregistered resident dogs and cats.
- (b) Creating an online reporting mechanism available to anonymous citizens and neighbors.
- (c) Contracting for a door-to-door survey seeking information about household and neighbors' animals.
- (d) Requiring landlords to condition occupancy on proof of animal registration.
- (e) Establishing a system by which MCAS would notify landlords (as well as owners of assisted living and "congregate care" facilities) of registration expiration with the expectation that the landlord would threaten eviction unless registration was renewed.
- (f) Requiring providers of animal-related services, including veterinarians, to refuse service to unregistered animals.

The process of creating and approving an action plan consistent with the task force recommendations is reportedly scheduled to begin before the City Council and the county Board of Commissioners in early June. Both governing bodies should resist the pressures being bought by Leonard and Wheeler and take the time necessary to learn how other communities have transformed their animal control agencies without huge expense and, most importantly, without trampling on their citizens' civil rights.

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