

With Capitola already out, Watsonville considers its relationship with county animal services

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WATSONVILLE -- City leaders hope to put a leash on spiraling animal control costs.

A cat and her kittens occupy an enclosed area with a window at the county Animal Services Authority shelter in Watsonville on Wednesday. (Kate Falconer/Sentinel)

Capitola already has pulled out of the agency that shelters strays and arranges pet adoptions countywide, and Watsonville could be next if costs keep going up.

Over the past two years, the city's contribution to the Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority has spiked \$100,000 to more than \$490,000.

Marc Pimental, the city's finance director, said the city's not ready to tear up its contract with the agency, but further hikes could lead city officials to rethink the issue.

"We're concerned," Pimental said. "We don't want to see these kind of increases"

In Capitola, the decision to drop out of the agency June 30, the end of the fiscal year, was based on the bottom line, said City Manager Richard Hill. That city has seen its costs triple in recent years.

Capitola, which has handled animal control itself and only used the agency for shelter, was expected to pay in excess of \$70,000 in the coming year. Since the agency serves little more than 100 animals from Capitola each year, the price tag was too high, he said.

The city has made arrangements with local veterinarians to handle strays.

Watsonville struggled with shelter management before contracting with Animal Services in 2004. Previously, the shelter had passed through several managers, most recently city police, who were pleased to pass the job to someone else. Back then, Capt. Kim Austin, who was in charge before the transfer, said police lacked the experience to run the operation and Animal Services promised a more professional approach.

Katherine Vos, who came on board as general manager of Animal Services in March, said the agency hadn't recognized all the difficulties of running two shelters when it took over the Watsonville site. The agency also operates a shelter in Scotts Valley.

It's more costly to staff two sites than one, then there's utilities and other facility-related expenses, Vos said.

Watsonville also generates a disproportionate amount of service calls, she said.

In 2006, Animal Serves sheltered 5,533 animals, more than half of which were cats or kittens, according to agency records. More than 3,700 were strays, and nearly 2,300 were euthanized.

Last year, the agency's board, which includes a representative from Watsonville, agreed to a new per capita formula for covering costs. That drove Watsonville's share up, she said.

Altogether, the city, county, Santa Cruz and Scotts Valley contribute about \$2.5 million toward the agency's \$3 million budget. The county pays the largest share, about \$1.3 million in the coming year.

Vos and Pimental said the agency likely will consider at some point whether it's cost-effective to keep the Watsonville shelter open, particularly after the agency moves its Scotts Valley operation to a new larger and more modern building in Live Oak in the summer of 2008. No one wants to see the Watsonville shelter closed, they said.

"It's a great little shelter," Vos said. "We hope it's going to stay up and running, but we certainly have to look at our costs"

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