

**JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION**  
**April 3, 2012**

City Commission Work Session

Mayor Winters presiding

**CALL TO ORDER:** 5:30 p.m.

**ROLL CALL:** City Commissioners present: Michael J. Winters, Bill Bronson, Fred Burow, Mary Jolley, and Robert Jones. Also present were the Deputy City Manager, City Attorney, Directors of Fiscal Services and Public Works, Police Captain, and the Administrative Secretary.

**1. ANIMAL SHELTER UPDATE**

Deputy City Manager Jennifer Reichelt introduced Animal Shelter staff: Jamie Bennett, Operations Manager; Laura McElhinney, Administrative Assistant/Volunteer Coordinator; and Tiffany Staigmiller, Office Clerk. Two other staff members not present were Lynn Formell, Veterinary Technician and Ashley Graham, Office Clerk.

Ms. Reichelt provided a PowerPoint presentation on the Animal Shelter. The presentation included Shelter operations; facility improvements/service changes; review of fees; policy review; volunteer program update; programs in the works; and policy direction.

Shelter operations include housing and caring of stray, abandoned and surrendered animals; pet adoptions and redemptions; licensing; cremation services; animal protection; public education; population control (spay/neuter); and volunteer opportunities. Ms. Reichelt stated efforts are being made to develop partnerships with local agencies.

Ms. Reichelt noted the Animal Shelter has been painted and signage has been updated. The Shelter is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Shelter is an open admission, municipal shelter which means no animal is turned away. The average intake is 191 animals each month; the most the Shelter can house at one time is 114.

Commissioner Jolley questioned the number of dogs vs. cats. Ms. Reichelt responded she would provide that information. Normally there are more cats than there are dogs, however, double the number of dogs than cats are adopted.

Ms. Reichelt reported that in 2011 the Shelter generated approximately \$183,000 in revenue. The operating budget is close to \$500,000. She also reported the Animal Shelter has been approved for 8.5 authorized employees, including four contracted kennel technicians.

Ms. Reichelt stated that an average of 2,375 animals come through the Shelter each year, however, not all of the animals are adoptable. Annually, an average number of 511 animals are redeemed and 815 animals are adopted from the Shelter. The average stay for dogs is 12 days, and double that number for cats.

Ms. Reichelt reported the daily cost of boarding and caring for an animal is \$10. On average, the Shelter sells a little over 1,600 licenses a year. The Shelter receives an average of 48 calls a

day/1,355 a month, and 19 calls a day/463 a month are sent out. Animal control calls are sent to Dispatch. She noted there is nonstop activity at the Animal Shelter.

Ms. Reichelt noted the City does not currently have a contract with Cascade County for services provided by the Animal Shelter. Approximately one quarter of the impounded animals come in through the County. Though some costs are recouped, the Shelter loses approximately \$16,000 per year. She stated the City previously had a contract with Cascade County and MAFB.

Commissioner Burow questioned if animal control officers are sent out to the County. Ms. Reichelt responded animal control officers are not sent out to the County; however, the Sheriff's Office brings dogs to the Shelter.

Ms. Reichelt reviewed animal shelter figures across the state. The euthanasia rate in Great Falls is substantially higher than in other cities, however, all feral cats that come into the Shelter are euthanized. She noted some shelters have barn cat or feral cat programs and trap/neuter/release programs. Some shelters are holding centers for adoption centers or designated no-kill shelters. Ms. Reichelt noted staff has been working on ways to increase adoptions.

Ms. Reichelt reviewed facility improvements in recent years including the HVAC system, fresh air intake and dog kennel fans, sealed kennel floors, a new flush system, painting the exterior and interior of the Shelter, repair of the incinerator fans and heating units, and new lighting in the triage room. Improvements have also been made to the isolation room.

Mayor Winters believes euthanizing 41% of the animals is unacceptable. Ms. Reichelt reported there are holding, waiting, and adoption periods as explained in the Policy Manual.

Commissioner Burow asked if efforts are made to find the owner. Ms. Reichelt responded staff spends time and resources trying to locate an owner.

Ms. Reichelt noted it is important to continue to promote licensing so lost pets can be returned to their owner. Only about 1,600 licenses are sold, and she believes most licenses are sold when animals are impounded because those fees are reduced if a license is purchased.

Commissioner Burow questioned if renewal notices are sent out. Ms. Reichelt responded staff is considering purchasing new software that will help with the licensing process.

Commissioner Jolley questioned if lifetime licenses are still sold. Ms. Reichelt responded lifetime licenses are currently sold, however, one year renewals are being considered.

Ms. Reichelt reported the new Animal Shelter web site has lots of information. Staffing changes include reclassifying an existing position to a Veterinarian Technician and an Administrative Assistant/Volunteer Coordinator. The Shelter has become a partner in local spay/neuter clinics, and the adoption process is now on a first come, first served basis.

Ms. Reichelt reported the first open house/information session will be held April 14, 2012, and she hopes people will be walking dogs and volunteering at the Shelter in early May, 2012. There has been a volunteer program at the Shelter through Job Service and the Great Falls Pre-Release Center, but it wasn't open to the general public.

Ms. Reichelt reviewed cost comparisons for shelters across the state. Most other shelters allow spay/neuter services to take place prior to adoption which she believes would increase adoptions at the Shelter. She also noted the \$200 deposit for spay/neuter services. Per Montana Code, any animal adopted from The Humane Society or a shelter must be spayed or neutered. The \$200 deposit has been used as an incentive to assure the animal is spayed or neutered, but makes for a hefty out-of-pocket expense to adopt an animal, in addition to increased staff time.

Ms. Reichelt reviewed proposed adoption fees that would incorporate spay/neuter costs, licensing fees, rabies vaccination, and microchip costs in one flat adoption fee. Being more creative with the adoption costs is one of the ways of decreasing the rate of euthanasia.

Ms. Reichelt reported that a letter was sent recently to local veterinarians, based on information obtained from communities across the state. Many communities have a vet on staff or are working with a vet who provides low cost services.

Ms. Reichelt reported that changing the fee structure may reduce revenue because unclaimed deposits are captured as revenue.

On average, the Shelter sells around 1,600 licenses per year, and license fees have generated approximately \$46,000 in revenue. Based on national averages, there are over 30,000 dogs/cats living in Great Falls. To be able to return pets to their owners, pets must be licensed. Staff has been brainstorming ideas to make licensing more proactive.

Ms. Reichelt reported current impoundment fees depend on whether an animal is licensed, altered, vaccinated, and the length of stay. She believes a large number of owners surrender their pets because they cannot afford to redeem them, or they have to wait until pay day which adds to the number of animals in the Shelter. She added that staff has discounted approximately \$12,000 per year in fees to get an animal home. Proposed changes include a straight fee.

Commissioner Burow questioned the \$100 spay/neuter deposit. Ms. Reichelt responded she believes the deposit encourages people to spay/neuter their animal.

Commissioner Burow and Mayor Winters expressed concern about requiring the \$100 spay/neuter deposit. Ms. Reichelt responded the deposit could be limited to repeat offenders.

Commissioner Jones believes the reduced fees and loss of revenue is the right direction and would like to see the results at the end of the fiscal year. He agrees with involving local veterinarians and seeking support from the County and MAFB.

The Commission expressed support for requiring a spay/neuter deposit on the second offense.

Ms. Reichelt provided a copy of the revised Animal Shelter Policy Manual.

Commissioner Jolley questioned the 96 hour waiting period for licensed pets before making them available for adoption and the 72 hour waiting period for unlicensed pets. She believes there should be the same waiting period for all pets.

Commissioner Jolley questioned the 24-hour hold that can be placed on an animal to insure the approved applicant is making the right decision. Ms. Reichelt responded the application is time stamped to insure the first come, first served basis.

Ms. Reichelt reported a Volunteer Program open house will be held Saturday, April 14, 2012, in the Gibson Room in the Civic Center. The name of the program will be 'The Shelter Sidekicks' and will provide residents an opportunity to share their time and talents with Shelter animals. Volunteer opportunities will include dog walking, office assistance, and community outreach.

Ms. Reichelt reviewed the volunteer program beliefs and goals and noted applications are available online. Programs in the works include new software, electrical and HVAC upgrades, and adoption and licensing promotions.

Mayor Winters reported he receives calls concerning customer service. Ms. Reichelt responded she believes customers will not call if they have a good experience, but customer service training is ongoing. She believes the Shelter has good staff; however, the environment is emotional and high stress.

The consensus of the Commission was to continue to work with the County and MAFB, reduce fees, and reduce the euthanasia rate.

Commissioner Bronson questioned how other shelters in the state are able to achieve a much lower euthanasia rate. Ms. Reichelt responded efforts are being made on a regular basis to ask those questions of other shelters.

A discussion followed on lifetime licenses and cremation services.

### ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Winters adjourned the work session of April 3, 2012, at 6:33 p.m.