

OWNER, COUNTY, VET WOULD SHARE COST

Health Board To Discuss Mandatory Spay/Neuter Program To Adopt Pets

BY ERIC CARLSON

In an effort to reduce the number of stray and unwanted animals put to death at the county animal shelter—about 5,000 last year—the Brunswick County Board of Health is considering a plan to require all pets to be spayed or neutered before adoption.

At its next meeting Monday night, the board will hear a report recommending that costs for mandatory sterilization be shared by adoptive pet owners, the county and local veterinarians. Under the plan, adoption fees would also pay for a pet's complete physical examinations, a rabies vaccination and tests for heartworm, parvovirus and feline leukemia.

The committee will suggest that the owner's share of the costs be covered by a fee of between \$46 and \$65 to adopt a dog and \$35 to \$55 for a cat, said Dr. Brad Kerr, chairman of the health board committee.

Depending on whether the animal is a male or female, veterinarians would normally charge \$134 to \$156 per dog and \$98 to \$121 per cat for such services, he said.

Costs for the procedures vary depending on whether the animal is male or female and because a heartworm test would be included for older dogs, Kerr said. Puppies less than six months old can be put on medication to prevent the growth of heartworms without an initial examination.

Under the committee's plan the county would contribute \$15 to the cost of services for a cat and \$30 for each dog adopted. The animal shelter currently charges \$21 to adopt a cat, \$12 per kitten, \$17 for puppies and \$33.50 for an adult dog. Those fees include a rabies vaccination only.

"The main benefit of all this will be to reduce the population of unwanted animals, which will save the county money in the long run," Kerr said.

As an example, Kerr noted that about 200 female dogs were adopted in Brunswick County last year without first being spayed. If each of those dogs produced another four unwanted puppies during the year, "that's another 800 dogs winding up at the animal shelter," he said.

At a cost of at least \$15 per animal to keep and feed each dog before putting it to sleep, "you could save the county \$12,000 if those puppies were not produced," Kerr said. The county's share of paying to have the 200 mothers spayed would only be \$6,000, he said.

The mandatory spay/neuter pro-

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—Patrick Newton, Health Board Chairman

gram was recommended to county health Director Michael Rhodes by animal control Supervisor Greg Thompson in a memorandum that said more than 5,000 "stray and unwanted" pets were impounded at the animal shelter last year. Only 294 were adopted.

"This high number of animals poses a potential public health risk and a serious drain on the financial resources of the county," Thompson wrote. "As the agency charged with attempting to reduce the number of stray and unwanted animals in the community, if we adopt animals that are capable of breeding, we may actually be contributing to the problem."

He noted that a single female dog and her descendants can produce more than 4,300 offspring in seven years. Two uncontrolled breeding cats and their descendants "can produce over 80 million offspring in 10 years," said Thompson.

"If we are to be effective in communicating to the public the importance of spaying and neutering their pets, our agency should be practicing this basic principle of responsible pet ownership by requiring animals that we adopt be sterilized," Thompson said.

Controversy Expected

The program may run into resistance from some health board members, who have questioned whether county tax money ought to be used to subsidize the cost of spaying and neutering adopted pets.

"I don't feel I should pay anything for a man who wants to adopt a dog," member Benny Ludlum said when the subject was discussed at an Aug. 8 board meeting. "It's not right for me to have to pay \$30 for your dog. If you want it, you ought to fit the whole bill. If you're not willing to pay the bill, they ought to put them to sleep."

At the same meeting, health board Chairman Patrick Newton said the idea of using tax money to subsidize the sterilization of adopted pets "goes beyond our duties of protecting the public health." He said residents of Brunswick County would be unlikely to support such a pro-

gram and expressed doubts about its cost effectiveness.

"I don't think, if you ran the numbers, that it would ever be cheaper to spay and neuter than to kill them," Newton said.

Member Bruce Quaintance noted that other costs should be considered when weighing the benefits of such a program. He said efforts to control unwanted pet births would directly benefit public health by reducing the number of stray dogs and cats that might expose humans to rabies.

Quaintance said stray animals al-

so cost taxpayers money in other ways, including the expense of hiring additional animal control personnel and purchasing more equipment to impound unwanted pets. Quaintance said that in the previous two months, his car had hit two stray dogs, costing him more than \$1,500 in repairs.

Kerr said the board might be surprised at the amount of public support for the idea of providing spay and neuter services at reduced costs. A recent survey of people who came to the animal shelter to adopt a pet brought positive responses from 26 out of 33 (or 79 percent) when asked if they would "pay \$65 to adopt a female dog if the dog would get a physical exam, heartworm tests, a rabies vaccination and would be spayed for that price."

The board of health will meet at 7:30 p.m. Monday in the Brunswick County Health Department building at the county complex in Bolivia.

Crop Disaster Aid Offered

Brunswick County farmers whose crops have been damaged this year due to adverse weather conditions such as drought or excessive rainfall will be eligible for a share of \$1 billion in emergency disaster aid announced Monday by President Bill Clinton.

Abnormal weather patterns have resulted in substantial crop losses in isolated but widespread areas, according to a release from the Brunswick County Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS).

Farmers suffering losses due to these natural disasters may apply for emergency assistance at their local Farm Service Agency (FSA) beginning Dec. 1. FSA is a newly-created

agency of the USDA which combines functions formerly carried out by the ASCS, the Federal Crop Insurance Corp. and the Farmers Home Administration.

The 1994 aid program is similar to those in recent years, in which farmers with crop insurance who suffered crop losses greater than 35 percent or normal production (or 40 percent losses for those without crop insurance) will be eligible for partial reimbursement.

"It's subject to change because the rules haven't been published yet, but we expect it will be a lot like the program last year—countywide, and all crops," said county ASCS Director Richard Toler.

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