

Vet Accused Of Beating Pets Denies Animal Cruelty Charges

BY RAHN ADAMS

Calabash veterinarian Dr. Kenneth Neal will appear in Brunswick County District Criminal Court Feb. 13 to answer misdemeanor animal cruelty charges that could jeopardize his veterinary license if he is convicted.

Neal, 30, of Calabash Animal Hospital, was arrested last Wednesday afternoon by the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department on four counts of cruelty to animals, according to county Animal Control Supervisor Zelma Babson, whose office investigated the case. Neal was released from custody last Wednesday on a \$5,000 bond.

"Basically, the charges are completely false and ridiculous," Neal told the *Beacon* last Thursday. "We want to go to court and prove we can be exonerated. We feel confident we can do that."

The investigation was prompted by a Jan. 4 incident involving a 3

1/2-year-old orange tabby cat owned by Grissetown resident Debbie Somerset, who said she had been taking her male cat, "Bocephus," to Neal for the past three years. Ms. Somerset said she had no previous complaints about Neal's care.

Ms. Babson said the other three charges involve a stray kitten and two chow dogs owned separately by Shallotte area residents Al and Nell Harrelson, and Teresa Inman. The veterinarian is accused of beating the four animals at the animal hospital on separate occasions between Nov. 7, 1988, and Jan. 4—the date he administered a feline leukemia test to Ms. Somerset's cat.

None of the pet owners was aware of the alleged abuse until Jan. 5, when former animal hospital employee Jane Burroughs contacted Ms. Somerset at home and told her that Neal had beaten the cat and thrown it against a wall the previous day, Ms. Babson said. She added

that Neal and Ms. Burroughs—who quit her job after the Jan. 4 incident—"were having a problem administering the test."

"It bit and scratched me, and we tried to restrain it the best we could," Neal explained, adding that he "dropped" the cat when it bit him. "I've devoted my whole life to the care and treatment of animals, and to say I did anything abusive to that animal is just ridiculous."

Neal, a former Alabama resident, began practicing veterinary medicine here in 1986, after working at animal clinics in Columbia, Tenn., and Paris, Texas. He is a 1985 graduate of the Auburn University veterinary school.

When Ms. Somerset filed her complaint Jan. 5 with the animal control office, Ms. Babson had the cat examined by two other local veterinarians. Both vets found that the pet had suffered a broken tooth, mild concussion, paralysis to one

side of its body, bruises and bleeding from its lips and gums, Ms. Babson said. The three animals involved in the other charges suffered no obvious injuries.

"I assumed I had a healthy cat when I left (the animal hospital)," Ms. Somerset said. She noted that after she picked up her cat Jan. 4 around 5 p.m., the pet "was just kind of out of it the rest of the night." However, after talking to Ms. Burroughs the next day, "I looked into the cat's mouth, and the evidence was there," Ms. Somerset said.

While Neal labeled the charges as accusations of a "disgruntled employee," Ms. Babson indicated that former employees other than Ms. Burroughs, who worked at the animal hospital only three weeks, were interviewed during the month-long investigation. "It was the former employees who supplied the information," she said, adding that approximately four other alleged

abuse-related incidents over the past three years surfaced during the inquiry about Neal's veterinary practice.

The maximum possible penalty for cruelty to animals is imprisonment of up to a year and/or a fine of up to \$1,000. Also, the license of a veterinarian who is convicted of animal cruelty can be revoked or suspended, according to Dr. Tom Zweigart, executive director of the N.C. Veterinary Medical Board in Raleigh.

Zweigart, who has served in his present post since 1973, said last Thursday that he did not know of any previous animal cruelty complaints involving Brunswick County veterinarians. "It's uncommon (anywhere in the state)," he said. "To my knowledge, since I've been here we haven't had a veterinarian's license revoked for cruelty to animals."

Neal said last Thursday that the charges against him would not af-

fect the operation of his animal hospital while he awaits trial. "We're staying open, and we were quite busy today," he commented. However, he also indicated that many of his clients had called to ask about broadcast news reports of his arrest.

The *Beacon* also received several inquiries last Thursday from concerned pet owners, including Pat Jodice of Shallotte. "I've been taking my dog there for the past year since moving here, and I've never experienced anything like that," Jodice said, "but this does have me worried."

With an appointment to take his golden retriever to Neal's office later that morning, Jodice said he would have to go home and discuss the situation further with his wife before keeping the appointment. "I really feel bad about it, to tell you the truth," he said. "I treat my dog like I do one of my sons, and I just don't know what to do now."

Political Survey Keys In On County Clerk Of Court Race

BY RAHN ADAMS

Although only two candidates—a Democratic incumbent and a Republican challenger—are running for the Brunswick County Clerk of Court's office, the county was awash with rumors last week that former Clerk of Court Greg Bellamy was "testing the waters" with a telephone survey.

Sue Bullock, owner of Independent Opinion Research and Communications in Wilmington, confirmed last Thursday that her company was conducting a phone poll of registered Brunswick County voters. She said the survey involved "issues and personalities" in local politics.

Calling the survey a "piggy-back poll," Ms. Bullock indicated that the work was being done on behalf of several candidates, but that all of the candidates involved "are not necessarily paying for it directly." She added that not all of the candidates would receive survey results, which were to be available early this week. The political filing period closed Monday at noon.

While survey questions dealt with candidates in various county and district races, the poll was obviously slanted to gather information on the local clerk of court's race. Among other questions, voters were asked to comment on Clerk of Court Diana Morgan's performance and on Bellamy's chances of defeating Ms. Morgan in an election.

Ms. Morgan, a Democrat who filed for re-election on the first day of filing Jan. 2, was the lone candidate for clerk of court until Republican Donald Willets entered the race Monday on the last day of the filing period.

According to local election records since 1950, only one local clerk of court candidate—long-time Clerk of Court Jack E. Brown—has been elected without either primary or general election opposition; Brown ran unopposed in 1966.

Appointed to the clerk's post in the fall of 1987, Ms. Morgan won re-election to a special two-year term in the fall of 1988. The term was set at two years in order to complete the unexpired term of Bellamy, who resigned in August 1987.

Another survey question dealing specifically with Bellamy asked voters if they knew Bellamy's current occupation. Bellamy, owner of Bellamy Realty at Boone's Neck, resigned during his third term as clerk of court, after he pleaded guilty to a cocaine possession charge and was sentenced to two years of probation. His probation was terminated in early 1989 on a recommendation from N.C. Attorney General Lacy Thornburg.

In a series of questions dealing with preferred qualities for a public office-holder, the pollster also asked, in general, if a minor drug violation would affect the respondent's support of a candidate.

When contacted last Thursday by the *Beacon*, Bellamy said he was aware of the poll; however, he would neither confirm nor deny that he had personally authorized the survey. Ms. Bullock also would not identify the candidate or candidates who hired her firm.

"If there's any chance that the press would treat it differently than they've treated past events, it might be something worth looking at," Bellamy said last Thursday of any future run for public office. "My inclination now is not to get involved one way or the other."

Bellamy also suggested that "a number of people" had possibly authorized the poll. County Democratic Party Chairman Glen Peterson and county GOP Chairman Malcolm Grissett both told the *Beacon* that their parties were not responsible for the survey.

Peterson said he first heard about the poll last Thursday morning. Grissett said Monday that he wasn't aware of the survey but added he had heard that some candidates—including Bellamy—were "testing the waters on their own."

The Republican chairman noted he also had heard that John Ramsey—an unsuccessful GOP clerk of court candidate in 1988—was considering another run for the post. Ramsey—who did not file—said Monday that he was not involved in the poll. His name was not mentioned in the survey.

Willets, a political newcomer who filed for this year's clerk of court race as a Republican, also said that he did not have a part in authorizing the political poll made by the Wilmington firm.

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CORPS REJECTS DREDGING PLAN State To Examine Opening Eastern Channel

BY DOUG RUTTER

State environmentalists will study the practicality of dredging Eastern Channel behind Long Beach and look further into possible sources of pollution in Lockwood Folly River.

The N.C. Division of Environmental Management decided on the study on the heels of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' recent decision against dredging of the channel, which originally linked the Lockwood Folly River and Atlantic Ocean.

In October, the N.C. Environmental Management Commission adopted a resolution endorsing a plan to dredge the channel in order to flush pollution out of Lockwood Folly River and asked the Corps of Engineers to evaluate the plan.

However, Lt. Col. Thomas C. Suermann, chief of the Corps of Engineers' Wilmington office, said dredging Eastern Channel would not be an "effective solution" to the river's water quality problems, in a Jan. 10 letter to the state Division of Environmental Management.

The main reason for the Corps' position is that the two major factors that control water flow from the river to the ocean—distance from the ocean to the mouth of the river and the difference in water depth

between high and low tides—would hardly be altered by dredging.

Suermann says in the letter there's really nothing that can be done to make a significant increase in the flow in and out of the river.

"It appears to us that the pattern of pollution in the river is consistent with the land development pattern in the area and that the gradual closure of the Eastern Channel is not the reason for the increase in bacteria in the Lockwood Folly River," Suermann writes. "Deepening the Eastern Channel is not expected to result in anything more than minimal navigation benefits, although maintenance costs would probably rise tremendously."

The letter further states that the district office does not have funds to study water quality in the Lockwood Folly River and does not anticipate receiving funds for such a project in the near future.

Also, Suermann says special authorization from Congress would be required to use federal dredging funds for any purpose other than navigational. The Corps cannot dredge for water quality reasons with authorization.

While the Corps is convinced the benefits of dredging Eastern Channel would not justify the expense, the state will continue to evaluate

the proposal.

John Dorney, special projects supervisor with the Division of Environmental Management, said he will project costs and find out which of the various state and federal permits would be needed to dredge the channel.

Also, he will study aerial photographs of the Eastern Channel dating back to 1938 and determine when the channel started to fill up with sand.

Dorney said work relating directly to Eastern Channel should be completed in early April, while the ongoing search for river pollution sources could last into the summer. An earlier state study concluded that septic tanks and stormwater runoff are the two most likely sources of pollution.

Following the work, Dorney said the state may recommend a hydrological model of the channel be built to help determine what would happen if it was dredged.

Wallace Smith, a spokesman for the Save Our Shellfish (SOS) organization, said the Corps of Engineers was "grasping at straws" in its list of reasons for rejecting the dredging plan.

SOS officials have been strong supporters of dredging the Eastern Channel since Holden Beach resi-

dent John Holden introduced the idea at an SOS meeting last March.

Referring to Suermann's letter, Smith said the pattern of pollution in the river is not only consistent with land development patterns, but also with the situation in Eastern Channel. He said reopening the channel would also create a more direct route between the river and ocean.

"The Corps just can't admit that they made an error in dredging the present inlet," said Smith. "The most depressing thing to me is seeing the historical importance and great economic benefits of the resources being ignored."

There were two dredge boats working at the existing inlet early this week doing maintenance dredging of the inlet and inlet crossing. In the last two years, Smith said the Corps of Engineers has spent more than \$1 million to dredge the inlet. However, he said it's often filled in with sand within three weeks of the dredging.

Based on Corps of Engineers' figures for dredging sand, Smith said the group has estimated that the Eastern Channel can be dredged for \$600,000. That amount of money would allow the mile-long channel to be cut 100 feet wide and 10 feet deep at mean low tide, he said.

Elections Set For May 8 Primary

(Continued From Page 1-A)

wine on the Democratic ticket. King retired last summer as assistant superintendent of the Columbus County Public Schools.

The May Democratic primary will decide the office, since there are no Republican candidates for the post. The 14th House District covers Brunswick County and parts of Pender and New Hanover counties.

State Senator

Two candidates filed for the 18th District State Senate race. Democratic incumbent R.C. Soles Jr. of Tabor City will face Republican challenger Leroy Stocks of Whiteville in the November general election. The 18th Senate District covers Brunswick, Columbus and Bladen counties, and part of Cumberland County.

District Attorney

Three Democrats and one Republican are running for the 13th District Attorney's post being vacated by Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Mike Easley of Southport. The 13th Judicial District covers Brunswick, Columbus and Bladen counties.

Democratic DA candidates are Rex Gore of Shallotte, Tom Aldridge Jr. of Route 2, Whiteville, and Michael T. Mills of Bolton. The only Republican candidate is C. Franklin Stanley of Tabor City.

District Court Judge

A Brunswick County attorney—Wayne Long of Shallotte—filed in the past week to oppose incumbent David G. Wall of Elizabethtown for a district court judgeship. Both are Democrats; no Republicans filed.

Superior Court Judge

Current Chief District Court Judge William C. Gore Jr. of Whiteville is assured of moving up to the superior court bench. The Democrat more crowded than the Brunswick County sheriff's contest. Five Democrats besides Southport's Mike Easley have filed, including Robert L. Hannan of Greensboro, R.P. "Bo" Thomas of Hendersonville, Harvey Gantt of Charlotte, Lloyd Garner of Thomasville and John Ingram of Cary.

Incumbent Jesse Helms is opposed on the Republican ticket by George Wimbish of Charlotte.

has no opposition. Gore's district court post will be filled by appointment after he assumes the new superior court judgeship.

U.S. Congressman

Republican candidates for the 7th Congressional District seat this year are Fries Shaffner of Wilmington and Robert Anderson of Fayetteville. Incumbent Democrat Charles G. Rose III is unopposed.

U.S. Senator

This year's U.S. Senate race is

VFW Plans Dance

Calabash VFW Post 7288 will sponsor a dance Friday, Feb. 16, from 8 p.m. until 11 p.m. at the post at Trader's Village in Calabash.

Steve Pethel of Myrtle Beach, S.C., will provide the music.

Members and guests are welcome. Tickets cost \$4 per person and will be sold at the door.

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