

HSI decision carries steep price tag

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Marion County taxpayers may need to brace for a half-million dollar price tag from recent decision by the Humane Society of Indianapolis

by Greg Brush, CEO, Feral Bureau of Indiana, Inc.

At the beginning of March, 2008, the Humane Society of Indianapolis announced an end to their long-time policy of accepting stray animals. They also announced that they will have significant restrictions on accepting owner surrendered animals. This measure is hoped to stem their nearly decade-long financial shortfalls, estimated somewhere between \$200,000 and \$1,000,000 for 2007.

This announcement has ignited a flurry of discussion, praise and criticism of the city's largest private animal shelter. It also has many asking what the fallout will be to the city's taxpayers. A week after HSI's decision, the Indianapolis Animal Care & Control division and HSI announced a Memorandum Of Understanding had been inked between the two agencies intended to help soften the blow to the city expected by HSI's policy change. The MOU isn't a legally binding contract, but more a statement of philosophical agreement. The MOU declares intentions to coordinate and streamline the efforts of the two agencies, trying to minimize the inconvenience to the public by no longer being able to easily take stray or surrendered animals to HSI's north side facility.

Critics of the move by the city include a number of area animal welfare organizations. They contend that ACC will bear the bulk of the expense in doing virtually all the euthanasia while HSI reaps the benefits of the donations and adoption fees. Most, though, seem to agree that the additional 2,100 strays expected yearly at ACC will be a big deal to the city's south side facility regardless.

According to the city's estimate, it costs \$88.55 to house a stray animal at Indianapolis Animal Care and Control for the legally-required 5 day holding period. In 2007, the city housed 8,800 such stray animals, presumably (by their math) at a cost in excess of \$779,000. The additional stray influx of 2,100 animals could well raise the figure to just under \$1,000,000 for 2008. But the math doesn't end there.

The city's shelter also took in 5,200 owner surrendered animals in 2007. The law does not mandate the same holding period for owner surrendered animals, presuming that stray animals may be lost pets that will be reclaimed. Indeed, about 7-1/2% of the animals admitted to the city's facility were reunited with their owners. The city, however, doesn't offer an estimate of the cost for housing and disposition of owner surrender animals.

Indeed, it's unclear how much the shelter's intake of owner surrender animals will increase. Since HSI will still accept animals they deem to be most adoptable after going through counseling with HSI staffers, some percentage of the animals will still be flowing through HSI's facility. In 2007, with a supply of over 5,000 owner-surrendered animals and 2,100 stray animals from which they can select, HSI found homes for just under 4,000 animals. That figure suggests that perhaps another 1,000 "less adoptable" owner surrendered animals may be headed for the city's municipal shelter. But wait. We're not done adding yet.

The city is now posting an Animal Control Officer at HSI's north side facility 4 hours a day, 3 days a week to accept stray animals by appointment. The animals will then be transferred down to the city's south side facility. At a time when budget restrictions are putting pressure on all city services, having one of the city's few ACO's sitting on the north side to accept strays for 1/3 of their work week, rather than investigating complaints of neglect and cruelty, or assisting IMPD on emergency runs involving animals increases the cost to the city in more ways than just financial. It also affects public safety, one of the keystones of the new city administration.

Since ACC currently dispatches officers to requests from citizens wishing to surrender animals, it seems this will likely increase too. This is a tremendously convenient service to offer to the public, albeit a costly one to the city. Given the cost of fuel, insurance, vehicle maintenance and the limited number of officers, one has to wonder if public safety is really served best in this way which people will no doubt want to use more often. As everything government does usually costs more than it should, an extra \$200,000-300,000 (or more) in animal intake and housing, \$150,000 for additional kennel staff, and appreciable increases in officer utilization and owner surrender animals, it takes little imagination to see this costing the city an additional half million dollars per year. No matter how you juggle it, the money has to come from somewhere?!

No one can dispute that HSI is a private organization, and has no legal requirement to accept strays or owner surrenders. Because they have in the past doesn't mean they must continue to do so. They have a duty to their donors and members to operate in a fiscally responsible manner. It will be up to those donors and members to decide how they feel about supporting HSI's new policy.

Does the Memorandum Of Understanding help or hurt the city? Ultimately, it probably will have little impact on the city if either party does or does not follow through with the principles outlined in the MOU. The solution to drastically reducing the intake of the nearly 27,000 animals coming into the two facilities yearly has apparently eluded city and HSI officials now for decades, so it's inconceivable that this half-measure will magically do the job.

In the immediate term, the city administration's hands are tied, as they are mandated to perform animal control functions by law, regardless of what HSI does. But as an operating mode, this new arrangement (which is more happenstance than strategic plan) poorly serves the public and even more poorly serves the animals. Many cities even larger than Indianapolis (like Boston and San Francisco) have tackled this problem successfully. It would be in the best interest of the city administration to consider a new operating strategy that better serves all the citizens of Indianapolis, both 2- and 4-legged.

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