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Making the cut

New legislation would make it mandatory to spay and neuter pets

By **Nicholas Miller**

"I'm Bob Barker, reminding you to have your pets spayed or neutered," the perennial *The Price is Right* host would famously bid adieu at the end of each program. Although Barker will retire in June, pet owners won't soon forget his trademark fare-thee-well if a recent proposal in the state Legislature becomes a law.

The California Healthy Pets Act would make it mandatory to spay and neuter almost all cats and dogs in California.

"We have a huge problem in California," began Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, who introduced the bill last week. "Nearly a million dogs and cats go into shelters every year, and over 50 percent of these animals are euthanized." The Assembly member said the state spends over \$250 million annually to operate shelters and kill animals. His bill comes on the footsteps of similar laws passed in Rhode Island and L.A. County.

The Sacramento Board of Supervisors first addressed a local spay-neuter ordinance last August; the Board will continue its discussion next month. Sacramento City Council talked about the idea at their February 27 meeting and hopes to pass an ordinance and fee increases by the end of March.

The Healthy Pets Act would divert \$250 million to animal-control agencies, who then would both enforce the spay-neuter ordinance and also generate additional revenue by charging eligible breeders "intact," or non spay-neuter animal, fees and by issuing fines to non-compliant pet owners.

The bill has near-unanimous support from animal-care professionals.

"Everything that we've done up until now hasn't worked," concluded Ron Faoro, president of the Sacramento-based California Veterinarian Medical Association. According to Faoro, state animal shelters euthanized nearly 500,000 cats and dogs in 2006, and some 20,000 were put to rest at Sacramento's three shelters.

Nicole Paquette, director of government affairs for Animal Protection Institute, also supports the new bill. She's part of the local Coalition to Stop Animal Overpopulation and previously has worked with Levine on legislation to improve treatment of zoo elephants.

"Backyard breeders are the crux of the problem," observed Rick Johnson, executive director of the Sacramento SPCA. "Responsible breeders follow-up with every animal placement that they do. The backyard breeder, those people are just trying to sell the animals and get them out of their household as quick as possible."



This pound kittie, named "Kitten," was rescued by her new owner before the inevitable.

SN&R Photo By Angela Hansen

Have your pet spayed or neutered. Call (916) 808-SPAY or look online at www.sacpetsearch.com.

www.cahealthypets.com

Of course, many reputable breeders vehemently oppose any law that would require their pets to be altered.

"I think that's a very disingenuous title," Joan Gibson Reid, 30-year member of the Sacramento Council of Dog Clubs, said of the Healthy Pets Act. "It's implying that if a dog is intact, then it's not healthy."

"Any time you're mandating a surgery like that, you're really sort of treading on a pet owner's property rights."

"Sometimes for the greater good you've got to make laws that perhaps slightly constrict freedom of the individual," conceded Faoro.

Critics like Reid also doubt the enforceability of such ordinances.

"The whole premise is to provide a financial incentive for people to get their animals altered," said City Animal Manager Hector Cázares of animal control's role, arguing that if city fees are increased but laden with heavy discounts, more pet owners will come forward to have their animals fixed. "It gives us some leverage to motivate people to alter their animals."

Breeder-fee revenues also would fund free and low-cost spay and neuter programs, which would result in millions in added income for private-sector veterinarians. The CVMA political-action committee has donated nearly \$150,000 to legislative re-election campaigns over the past two years, according to the secretary of state's Web site.

Despite their quibbles with the bill, most will concede that spay-neuter legislation is preferable to the killing of an estimated four million cats and dogs nationwide each year.

"There are just too many animals for the number of homes out there," argued Nicole Forsyth, president of United Animal Nations, a Sacramento-based organization that provides emergency and disaster-relief animal sheltering. "The only way to stop this senseless killing is just to have an aggressive spay-neuter bill. It doesn't restrict people from breeding," she said. "It just makes it so they need to get a permit."

Assemblyman Levine, who doesn't own animals because he travels between Sacramento and Los Angeles, reiterated that pure-bred breeders are not the problem. Instead, the law targets the proverbial "puppy mills" and "backyard breeders."

"My tax dollars are part of that \$250 million each year that's spent to euthanize animals," he said. "Go to the local shelter and tell me how many of those animals look like they're pure bred."