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EDITORIAL

Spay/Neuter Bill Merits Passage

IT HAS been the target of mockery, rage and passionate debate. Assembly Bill 1634, which requires the spaying or neutering of dogs and cats, shows that nothing arouses the citizenry like a proposal to regulate the treatment of pets.

While the clamor has not eased, the California Healthy Pets Act has become more reasonable through amendments in the legislative process. The version to be considered in the Senate Local Government Committee on Wednesday has addressed some of the concerns that created such an uproar upon its introduction.

For example, some pet owners argued that four months was too soon to spay or neuter certain dogs and cats. The time frame was extended to six months, with a provision to wait even longer with a veterinarian's recommendation. Some pet owners warned that the bill would foretell the "end of mutts" in California and unduly restrict the rights of folks who are not commercial breeders to allow their dog or cat to have even a single litter. A provision for a "one litter" per year exemption was added. Some alleged the bill was "elitist" and the \$500 penalty was too harsh for low-income pet owners. The bill now requires that the penalty be waived if the cited owner gets his or her pet spayed or neutered.

Obviously, there are some pet owners who regard this as a property-rights issue and would not be satisfied with any modifications.

This week, the halls of the Capitol will be filled with passionate advocates on both sides of the issue, and it's safe to assume that at least 99 percent of them are responsible pet owners. Regrettably, too many Californians are not, which is why this law is needed. It is modeled after a Santa Cruz County ordinance that has been credited with reducing the number of euthanized animals by 50 percent.

Each year, more than 800,000 dogs and cats are abandoned in this state -- and about half of them are euthanized, according to Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, author of AB1634. It's not just cruel, it's a huge waste of government resources. Taxpayers spend about \$300 million a year to shelter and put down those unwanted animals, Levine said.

The bill cleared the Assembly, 41-38, without a vote to spare. The Senate, which is getting intense lobbying from animal lovers on both sides of the issue, should be open to further minor tweaks to accommodate practical concerns that arise.

But the concept of the bill is sound. Voluntary compliance is not working. Legislators should pass AB1634, as a matter of compassion and as a matter of fiscal prudence.