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County's inaction keeps pets in antiquated shelter

SLIDE SHOW: 'I honestly don't know what's taken so long,' supervisor says.

By **TERI SFORZA**

The Orange County Register

For at least a quarter century, Orange County has meant to build a new shelter for thousands of lost and abandoned animals that every year end up in its care.

It has been unable to do so.

"One of the most frustrating problems which has avoided solution during my years as supervisor, has been locating an acceptable site for the South County animal shelter," wrote Supervisor Thomas F. Riley in a letter dated Jan. 18, 1983.

Riley died in 1998, with the issue still unresolved. And despite decades of plans and promises, Orange County still has essentially the same shelter, in the same spot, as it has since World War II.

"I honestly don't know what's taken so long," said Supervisor Bill Campbell, who this week asked county staffers to move forward on this in earnest. "I've been to the shelter. I see the need."

Others have seen the need as well. The shelter has been the subject of two grand jury investigations over the last decade, finding, among other things, mismanagement, conflicts of interest, deficiencies in animal care and a disregard for public safety. Crowding was so bad that animals were euthanized ahead of schedule to gain space for new animals.

"The Animal Care Center facility is aging badly," said a 1999 grand jury report titled "We Can Do Better ... Improving Animal Care." But, on the bright side, the report noted that "plans for relocating the facility to the site of the former Marine Corps Air Station in Tustin are progressing. A new facility, designed by architects experienced in the building of animal shelters, should be state-of-the-art."

When another grand jury investigated five years later, that facility still wasn't built.

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The 2004 grand jury wrote: "If the Animal Shelter is to continue to meet the needs of the citizens of Orange County, it appears that there are only two viable options: either the Animal Shelter must be relocated elsewhere or (officials) should consider making use of 'excess' space at one or more city-run animal shelters."

Four years later, neither has happened. The Tustin site was agreed to, and every year county officials thought it would be "this year, this year, this year," said board Chairman John Moorlach. "And here we are, so many years later, and it's still 'next year.'"

The current crop of supervisors has only been on the board a few years, so the shelter issue far outdates them.

Plans for a new shelter on 5 acres at the old Tustin base are stuck in bureaucratic webs. The federal government won't transfer the land to the county's control until the county has an approved plan in place to preserve the giant blimp hangar there. This week, Campbell asked county CEO Thomas Mauk to push forward with a shelter on those 5 acres anyway. The answer, in the past, has been no.

Another potential site has been chosen – on Grand Avenue in Santa Ana – but any new facility is still years away. A new shelter

would cost an estimated \$25 million, paid for by the county and 22 cities that use it.

This week, supervisors said part of the county's 100 acres at the old El Toro air base might be used for a new shelter, but that wouldn't be of much practical help, as the cleanup of contamination at El Toro is expected to take many years.

Activists in South County are pushing their cities to withdraw from the county animal control system and start their own regional shelter.

The county's shelter, in Orange, was built in 1941 with 25 kennels and an on-site "pound master" whose sole mission was to deal with rabid animals. Over the decades, the shelter has been added to in bits and pieces to keep up with the county's growth – new rows of kennels here, new temporary buildings there.

Still, basic problems remain. A new soda vending machine recently blew out the electricity. An outdoor bathing area where volunteers often wash animals has only cold water. Many kennels are exposed to the elements. And despite the paw prints painted on the pathways, many find the shelter depressing.

"I think it's amazing that our folks keep it as clean as they do, with it as old as it is,"

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Campbell said. "It should be replaced."

In the meantime, the old Orange shelter is getting a \$330,000 face lift, to be completed this summer. The remodel will put customer service windows in the front and upgrade the electrical system.

Much has changed at the county shelter since the grand jury's 2004 report. A new director has been hired and a new philosophy embraced. Jennifer Phillips has brought a "pro-life, pro-adoption" stance to the shelter and revved up public outreach, adding a mobile pet adoption van, two public education officers, a rescue coordinator and a volunteer coordinator. The shelter also works more closely with nonprofit animal rescue groups than it did before.

Figures show that the number of dogs and cats adopted soared 45 percent since Phillips took over. The number of dogs and cats impounded rose 10 percent, and the number euthanized rose 14.6 percent, as well. The amount spent on animal services also is up, from \$10.2 million in 2004-05 to \$13.6 million this year.

"There has been a lot of emphasis put on improving the programs and services," said Steve Dunivent, the county's deputy chief executive. "More resources have been put into the staff that answers the phones, refurbishing the cages, improving public

service. The CEO has put a high priority on getting this project moving."

Orange County's shelter is the largest of its kind west of the Mississippi. It is an open-access shelter, meaning that, unlike most other shelters in the county, it takes any animal dropped off. As a result, the county shelter has a higher kill rate than most others in the area.

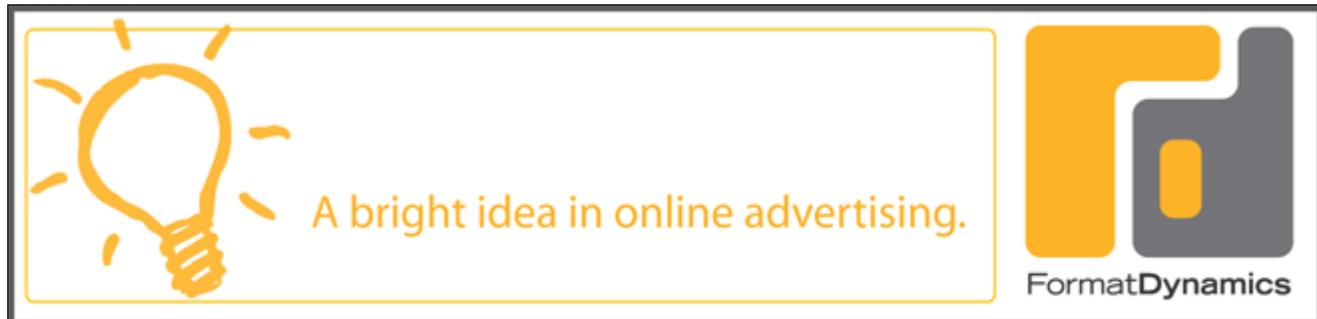
Last month, the city of Los Angeles adopted a mandatory spay-and-neuter law to reduce the number of unwanted animals killed in its shelters. Just days before, Huntington Beach rejected a similar proposal, and the idea of stronger spay-and-neuter law hasn't been formally debated by Orange County supervisors.

"I'm new to this issue, but we're willing to put some weight behind it," Moorlach said. "Behind the scenes, we are working on a reorganization which should reposition the animal shelter to allow us to be a little more proactive.

"Despite the limitations, we should be proud of the services provided," he added. "But things could be better."

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