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FEATURED

Towns reimagine animal board

By JOE PINCHOT Herald Staff Writer Oct 7, 2016



JOE PINCHOT | HeraldA pair of dogs await adoption at the Shenango Valley Animal Shelter.

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HERMITAGE – The Shenango Valley Animal Control Board is starting to flex its governing muscles after years of little activity and the belief that it was just an advisory board.

The board's top priority since it decided to assume its authority over the Shenango Valley Animal Shelter is to reach an agreement with Mercer County Regional Council of Governments so that COG can keep operating the shelter for stray, abandoned and dangerous dogs and cats as it has done for years.

Officials are working on a draft agreement that ultimately would need to be approved by the COG board and the councils in Hermitage, Sharon, Sharpsville, Farrell and Wheatland. The five communities created the board in 1966, when Hermitage was still Hickory Township.

The board built the shelter at Broadway Avenue and Lynnwood Drive. COG was created in 1971 and eventually was tabbed to operate the shelter.

The board met only sporadically over the years, with the belief that its role was only advisory.

West Middlesex and Shenango Township later became shelter members, but Shenango pulled out in 2013.

Hermitage City Manager Gary P. Hinkson said he started researching the history of the shelter and the board in 2008, when former COG Executive Director Thomas R. Tulip called him to ask for help with a large, dead tree that Tulip believes was threatening the building. Tulip believed Hermitage owned the land on which the shelter was built. While Hinkson knew the city did not own the land, he did not know who did.

His research turned up the deed to the property listing the five towns, Hickory's ordinance authorizing the creation of the board, a Pennsylvania Economy League study upon which the creation of the board and shelter were based and other documents.

Jump ahead to a year or two ago when Hinkson became aware that COG believed the board was advisory. Hinkson said he asked Tulip for any documentation supporting that belief, and Tulip found none.

"All this led to the process to create, and eventually execute" the agreement now being discussed, Hinkson said.

The board met Aug. 31 to reorganize, and held its second meeting Wednesday.

While the concerns of board members are far reaching – addressing the problems of stray cats and dangerous dogs, getting volunteers to help out at the shelter – Hinkson tried to focus them on the agreement with COG.

COG is running the shelter on an \$80,750 budget for 2016, of which \$58,500 comes from municipal assessments. Six part-time employees staff the shelter and their wages and benefits account for \$56,410 of the expense total.

“We’ve done this on a shoestring budget for years,” said new COG Executive Director Kim DiCintio.

The budget number has been consistent for several years, and is down from \$89,199 in 2009, when the shelter had a full-time warden.

COG takes a \$3,000 administrative fee – a number that has fluctuated between \$2,000 to \$8,000 in the period dating back to 2008 – but DiCintio said she might ask for more as the shelter is no longer a COG program.

“If it’s going to be a stand-alone thing with its own board, we’re going to have to revisit the cost,” she said.

The board faces the question of what to do about the shelter, which has maintenance issues and is believed by some to be too small. Hermitage Commissioner Duane J. Piccirilli, the shelter board president, called the condition of the shelter “deplorable.”

DiCintio urged that the rubber roof be fixed before winter and presented an estimate of about \$18,000 to replace the roof, but the board did not act on it.

The state dog warden, who houses dogs at the shelter, inspects the shelter about twice a year and COG makes any recommended changes, which DiCintio said always are minor. She noted that COG replaced wood that dogs had chewed as a result of the latest inspection.

Inspection records dating back to 2006 are available at the state Department of Agriculture website, and the 2016 reports show the shelter was in compliance with state law.

COG sought an estimate on expanding the shelter and HHSDR Architects/Engineers, Sharon, tendered a proposal with an estimated cost of \$540,000, when engineering, surveying, testing and other soft costs are added in. No action has been taken since Tulip presented HHSDR’s proposal to the COG board in May.

There is an endowment designated for capital work at the shelter that generates about \$6,000 a year, DiCintio said. She said she didn’t know much about it and officials want to dig deeper into the source and how it is controlled.

With Tails of Hope, a nonprofit organization of individuals and animal rescue groups, having built a new building up Lynnwood at Hoezle Road, some officials question whether the shelter should remain open at all. The board met in Tails of Hope's Thomas M. O'Brien Animal Care Center Wednesday.

Tails of Hope wants to open a spay and neuter clinic in the O'Brien center by the end of the year or early next year, said President Diane O'Brien. The building was built in 2013 to be a shelter for the Humane Society of Mercer County, but the society is no longer in the picture.

Once the agreement with COG is put to bed, Piccirilli said he wants the board to meet with the Tails of Hope board to discuss objectives and whether there would be interest in some sort of joint venture.

DiCintio said she wants the board to set policy about handling older and dangerous animals, and how long they should be kept. While COG has made a concerted effort to find animals homes, it still has vets euthanize a few. So far this year, one dog and five cats have been put down.

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It is my understanding that currently the board does not allow volunteers. I believe volunteers will be beneficial to both human and animal alike. Perhaps the board could also look into spaying and neutering grants like they do in Lawrence County.

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