

Animal activists discuss 'real problem'

By KEVIN HARDEN
Of the Emerald

Urge responsible pet ownership

It's been going on for nearly nine months, but when the fight to eliminate the use of the controversial decompression chamber in Lane County is over, the groups opposed to the machine plan to tackle the real problem, two animal welfare activists say.

According to Diane Yeager and Allan Thomas, when the political battle over the Green Hill Animal Shelter's Euthanair chamber is decided in Tuesday's primary election, solving the real problem of responsible pet ownership and controlling the unwanted animal population in Lane County will be their next step.

Yeager, head of the Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), and Thomas, Executive Director of the Tri-Agency Animal Control Authority, say animal welfare is their real objective and the decompression chamber issue was just a tangent to their causes.

The chamber became the focus of a controversy last September when several citizens, including the machine's operator, questioned its humaneness.

The chamber, a large cylindrical machine that kills animals by suffocation, has since failed mechanically and won't be repaired for

use in the Green Hill Animal Shelter (formerly the Lane County Humane Society).

The issue facing the voters Tuesday, Yeager and Thomas say, is not just the decompression chamber, but the concept of animal welfare in the county.

"The thing (the chamber) is just a social dinosaur anyway," Thomas says. "The people who originally manufactured it aren't even making it any more. It's almost impossible to get it repaired. So my guess is that in five years there won't be a decompression chamber operating inside the

country."

Eliminating the chamber is one way to insure the welfare of animals in Lane County, he says, the better way, however, is to prevent the animals from breeding unchecked.

Both PAWS and the Committee to Ban Decompression Chambers in Lane County (CBDC) have been supporting Ballot Measure 6, which eliminates the chamber and replaces it with injections of sodium pentobarbital as the method of killing unwanted animals. While several groups have opposed the measure, Thomas and the Tri-Agency Animal Control Authority has actively supported the measure.

Thomas, who only recently became the head of the agency, says he is "perplexed" over local veterinarians' opposition to the measure.

"Vets and animal welfare agencies are not always in the same business," Thomas explains. "They (the vets) deal with animals that people care about and they usually don't have to kill them. But we're dealing with the animals that no one cares about."

"Animal welfare agencies are too often treated like the city dump where people can just take their animal there and throw it away. Contrary to belief, we are not a city dump."

While veterinarians may be pro-

fessionals in the practice of animal medicine, members of the tri-agency are professionals in the social problem of unwanted animals, Thomas says.

Most veterinarians didn't see the more than 20,000 unwanted animals killed in Lane County last year, he says.

"A lot of people think of animals like aluminum cans," he says. "They think that if they get hit by a car or lost or just die, they can recycle them like they would a can."

The ballot measure, however, has been plagued with more than just opposition from local veterinarians, Yeager says. Confusing wording and last-minute voter apprehension about the replacement drug's cost, may also be hurting its success.

"I think it's important for people to know that if they vote 'yes' they are eliminating the chamber," she says. "Some people may just read it for the first time and think that to get rid of the chamber they should vote 'no' against it."

The questions about the replacement drug's cost and availability were raised by a Portland-based veterinarian supply salesman whose company doesn't carry sodium pentobarbital. In most cases, the drug can be obtained by return mail when ordered, and it costs only five cents to kill a large (70-pound) dog, she says.

Whether or not the measure passes, Yeager and Thomas say they will continue their efforts to educate county pet owners in the ways of responsible ownership.

Since Thomas took over the tri-agency, new policies concerning animal licensing and population control have been instituted. The agency's low-cost spay-neuter clinic will open later this year following the construction of the new tri-agency building.

Through the agency and PAWS, anyone who wants to learn responsible pet ownership, can get guest speakers and information, Yeager and Thomas say.

"I think that there is a growing consciousness that animals do have rights and we have to consider their welfare in everything we do to them," Yeager says.

"Hopefully, in five years, if we've done our job right we won't have 20,000 unwanted animals killed in Lane County a year," Thomas says. "I'd hope we could cut that number down to just five or six a year."

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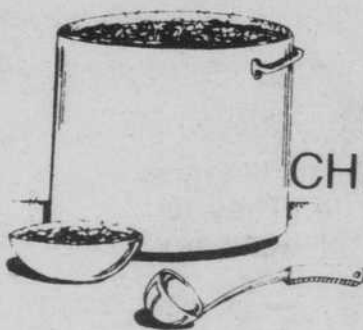
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