

**A CITIZENS' EVALUATION REPORT
ON HOW
THE SAN MATEO COMMUNITY ANIMAL TASK FORCE
WAS CONDUCTED**

October 15, 1991

A CITIZENS' EVALUATION OF HOW THE SAN MATEO COMMUNITY ANIMAL TASK FORCE WAS CONDUCTED

Introduction

The Sturla/Nolan Ordinance was crafted without input from either the community at large or individuals involved in the dog or cat fancies. At the hearings held to solicit public comment on the ordinance, there was such an outcry of opposition that the Board of Supervisors sought a temporary compromise position. Although the ordinance was passed, in effect making it illegal to own unspayed or unneutered pets, its implementation was delayed. During the time of the delay a Community Animal Task Force was formed and instructed to "identify issues and options, analyze data and work on the details of optional approaches" concerning the problem of overpopulation.

From its inception, the Task Force was doomed to ineffectiveness in producing options different from the ordinance for addressing the stated mission of reducing the number of healthy animals euthanized in San Mateo County. Had the Task Force been convened prior to the introduction of the ordinance, without its constraints, more would have been accomplished. The process used to select members, the ambiguous instructions that were given to task force members, the efforts to suppress discussion of data or alternative ideas all demonstrated an unwillingness by County Officials to seriously address the real issues. The so called Task Force appears to have been merely a smokescreen for the County to pursue its own agenda concerning the untenable ordinance that had been passed by local politicians. This report recounts the county's role in impeding the honest work of Task Force members.

Biased Task Force Selection

The Task Force was supposed to have been composed of members of several different community constituencies affected by the ordinance -- e.g., dog and cat fanciers, veterinarians, animal welfare agencies, the general public, and the county agencies involved with animals. The ostensible procedure for appointment to the Task Force was to submit an application to the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors which stated one's qualifications.

- **The actual composition of the Task Force included too few cat experts, the individuals best equipped to address San Mateo County's major animal problem -- cats.**

Cats are the principal animal problem in San Mateo County. Even though the extent of the problem of unwanted animals euthanized was never reliably quantified, all members of the Task Force did agree that the vast majority of euthanized animals were cats. It would have been reasonable to expect, therefore, that a number of cat experts as members would be included. Instead, there were only two representatives of the cat fancy appointed. At least one other cat expert requested membership but was told that County residency would be

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required. This requirement did not prohibit the appointment of several others who, in fact, live outside of the County. The Task Force's lack of knowledge on the subject of cats caused a great deal of time to be wasted and produced a misallocation of effort toward dogs.

- **The actual selection of the members was influenced significantly by one special interest group -- Responsible Dog Breeders of San Mateo County.**

The Responsible Dog Breeders of San Mateo County (RDB of SMC) had a disproportionate effect on the selection of Task Force members. One of the officers of this organization told at least four members of the Task Force that he had been responsible for their appointments. A lobbyist hired by RDB of SMC had apparently submitted an "approved" list of people to the County. For evidence that this was indeed the case one need only examine the appointment of a woman who had not even submitted an application for membership. When contacted about why she was not in attendance at the meetings she stated that she did not wish to serve on the task force and had not applied.

- **The majority report of this Task Force will do little to reduce the number of animals euthanized in San Mateo County because it fails to substantially address the large number of accidentally bred, often unowned cats.**

Awkward Task Force Subcommittee Structure

Thirty people were ultimately selected to serve on the Task Force. We were told that the County's intent had been to permit broad participation. Although the County split the Task Force into two subcommittees -- Technical and Policy, they acknowledged that due to the number of people involved it would be difficult to work effectively.

The roles and interactions of these two committees were not clearly delineated. The Technical Committee was supposed to gather information, study issues and make recommendations to the Policy Committee. Policy was to research the political process in San Mateo County in order to propose how the outcome of the Task Force could be "sold" to all the County's municipalities and to make final recommendations on action to the Board of Supervisors. At the initial meeting, one newly appointed Policy member observed that in actuality there was nothing for the Policy Committee to do. Subsequently, she rarely came to scheduled meetings and did not participate in developing recommendations. She and others who failed to participate were never replaced on the committee.

The most significant of all the problems posed by this awkward structure was that many of the Policy members who were expected to make recommendations on action to the Board of Supervisors were not fully informed about the various options because they failed to attend the Technical meetings or read the written work that committee produced.

- **When the time arrived for reporting to the Board of Supervisors, few members of the Policy Committee were familiar with the research that the Technical Committee had done. Their recommendations were, therefore, negotiated from positions of self-interest and concession rather than on the**

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merits of how well each would or would not address the problem.

Unclear Mission of the Task Force

County officials would not or could not define what the Task Force was empowered to do. Many Task Force members wanted to know if recommendations could be made to replace the Sturla/Nolan Ordinance or was the charge only to make recommendations to amend it. A clear understanding of this issue would have enabled members to more efficiently use the allotted time. Since resolution of this point did not occur through the entire duration, more time than the County intended was spent as committee members developed a comprehensive program that would address the real issues of animal population control rather than merely provide a political compromise. Many members of the Task Force devoted substantial amounts of time at great personal expense to work that was not fully explored. Consideration of this work would have enhanced the final recommendations of the Task Force.

Mismanagement of Task Force Meetings

County officials used few resources in ensuring that the Task Force meetings would proceed efficiently. At the simplest level, there were no resources allocated to producing official minutes of the meetings. The informal "working notes" often failed to represent what had taken place at the meetings. Valuable time was therefore wasted at virtually every meeting clarifying what had actually happened.

The facilitator biased committee process by frequently suppressing discussion. One of his most memorable comments was that "We'll let the vote be our discussion". Prior to meetings, the facilitator often planned strategy within view and hearing of committee members with County and Peninsula Humane Society representatives as to how documents and reports that they preferred not to discuss would be suppressed. (The May 1991 California State Auditor General Report on Spay /Neuter Deposits was one such document.)

The data surrounding animal overpopulation are obviously important in defining the problem. Yet County representatives made every effort to suppress evaluation of that data. The Board of Supervisors enacted the Sturla/Nolan Ordinance based on Peninsula Humane Society's data concerning animals euthanized. This data was thought by some to be exaggerated and misleading. Certainly a thorough analysis was appropriate since this data was the very basis for the assertion that there was a need for legislative action.

• **The County and PHS obstructed every effort directed toward more substantial analysis of the "kill" statistics. An analysis of the data clearly proves that there is no need for such an ordinance and points the way to solutions which would better address the problem.**

Many members of the Technical Committee read the articles published in the Journal of the Veterinary Medical Association issue devoted to the subject of animal overpopulation. There were articles in this issue, drawn from forty years of research, that suggested that changing policies at animal shelters would be likely to have the greatest impact on animal overpopulation.

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- **County officials and PHS vehemently resisted inquiries into the possible effect changes in shelter policy might have versus the proposed mandatory spay and neuter of community pets.**

County representatives initially conducted all Task Force meetings, ostensibly to produce a more efficient process. The reverse resulted. The Technical Committee was urged to develop its own agenda for proceeding with its inquiry. After having done so, County representatives presented a new agenda, without explanation, and insisted that it be used instead. This became a procedure that was oft repeated. Frustration at the slowness of committee progress was often voiced and the "breeder and breeder sympathizers" were accused of impeding progress.

- **It was the County's own interference with process that wasted considerable amounts of meeting time.**

Flawed Process

In preparing for the required Public Hearing, several controversial items were placed on the agenda for public input with the understanding that full discussion of feasibility and efficacy would eventually take place. These issues were never again discussed. Subsequently, this good faith agreement to obtain public input was misinterpreted by Mr. Riley to mean that committee members had reached consensus.

Improper Conduct by County Representatives

- **There were several instances over the life of the Task Force when county representatives took improper if not unethical actions.**

The least egregious of these actions resulted in nonproductive committee time. Both subcommittees agreed that no member would discuss conclusions under development with members of the press. Yet interviews were given by County representative, George Riley, to local newspapers. The ensuing discussions proved to be very disruptive since the interviews were perceived as being a breach of good faith on the County's part.

Mr. Riley, as chairman of the Policy Committee, tried to silence controversial discussion instead of permitting all sides of an issue to be heard. In a telephone call to one of the members of the Task Force, he threatened to limit that person's speaking time during the course of committee work.

The most serious of Mr. Riley's improprieties was his final actions to dictate the content of the report to be sent to the Board of Supervisors. He had stated that consideration would be given to all recommendations and materials submitted. He was given four differing sets of recommendations. Prior to studying the individual reports as promised, Mr. Riley attended an emergency Peninsula Humane Society board meeting that was held several hours after the deadline for submission of reports. He demanded that the PHS board direct its employees as well as those closely aligned with the shelter to withdraw their separate proposal and to support the one negotiated outside the Task Force meetings with members of RDB of SMC and Mr. Riley's staff. This action forced a majority report out of what would

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have been 2 minority reports. He apparently did not wish to go before the Board with the consensus view that had been signed by a plurality of the Task Force that included the broadest representation (public member, agriculture representative, 'city selected' person and veterinarian in addition to dog and cat fanciers) rather than two special interest groups.. Mr. Riley's action of advocating for the recommendations of his own choosing prior to giving consideration to any other demonstrates clear bias. It could also be viewed as a breach of good faith towards those whose work he had promised to consider.

- **Mr. Riley forced the creation of a Task Force report that was neither what Peninsula Humane Society supporters wanted nor what a true majority of the Task Force recommended.**

Missed Opportunity

Multi-disciplinary discussion of the problem of animal population control offered a new chance at finding innovative solutions. Unfortunately, the opportunity was subverted by an unwillingness of County and Humane Society officials to have open dialogue. Many questions pertinent to the problem were asked but never answered. Public and breeder members of the Community Animal Task Force were often treated rudely and with open hostility.

The Board of Supervisors gave our citizen's task force a mission to address. Instead of allowing the committee to work unimpeded and accepting the honest results of that process, County officials sought to control and manipulate the group toward recommendations that were "politically acceptable" but ignored politically embarrassing facts. In so doing the mission, the real problem, was not properly addressed.

We believe in public process. When allowed to interact without interference, good, honest people can accomplish much. Community task forces can serve the public well. Unfortunately this was not the case for the San Mateo Community Animal Task Force.

Indeed, an opportunity was missed.