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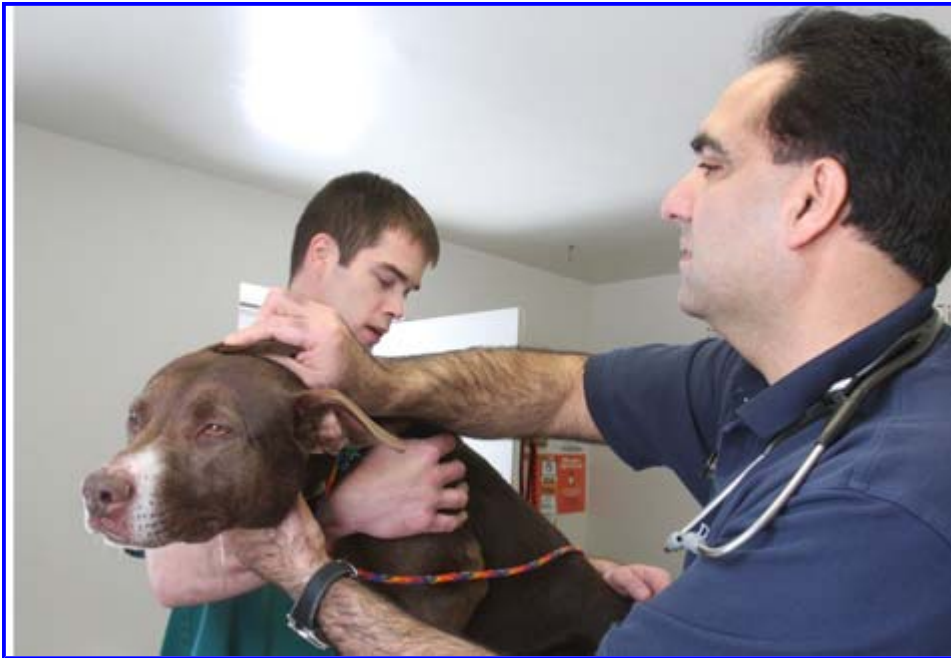
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# Outcry over plan to ship shelter dogs to Brookhaven Town

By [Tim Gannon](#) | March 1, 2011 in [Featured Stories](#)





Buster, a Riverhead Animal Shelter pet, gets a check-up from a vet. Riverhead officials said they're looking to transfer shelter pets to Brookhaven in an effort to save money.

Riverhead Supervisor Sean Walter's proposal to ship dogs from his town's animal shelter to the Brookhaven Town Animal Shelter in Yaphank has met with opposition from some residents as well as from the Brookhaven councilwoman who is that Town Board's liaison to the animal shelter.

But Mr. Walter said he has discussed the issue with Brookhaven Supervisor Mark Lesko, who has expressed interest in the idea, and that he will continue to pursue it.

The supervisor said he believes such a program could save Riverhead between \$100,000 and \$150,000 per year. He said he was hoping to keep it under wraps until the details get worked out, but it came up at an animal shelter advisory meeting Monday when Police Chief David Hegermiller discussed it while responding to a question.

Calverton resident and animal rights activist Rex Farr asked Mr. Walter about the plan a day later, at Tuesday's Town Board meeting. Mr. Walter then spilled the beans.

"Mark Lesko and I have had preliminary conversations where they are interested in taking over our animal shelter function," Mr. Walter said. "In fact, so much so that they said we close our animal shelter and bring all the animals from Riverhead to Brookhaven. I think it's a fantastic idea.

"The preliminary numbers we've discussed are that it would probably save [Riverhead Town] about \$150,000 per year. It is exactly in line with what Governor Cuomo's been talking about. It's exactly in line with what every single municipality has been talking about. It's combining municipal services, there would be no duplication of effort, We would still have an animal control officer in this town, Whether it is a Brookhaven ACO or a Riverhead ACO remains to be determined."

Brookhaven has 160 dogs, Mr. Walter said. Riverhead has about 18 currently.

Brookhaven Town Board member Jane Bonner, who serves as the that Town Board's liaison to the shelter, said in an interview during Tuesday meeting in Riverhead that it would not be possible for Brookhaven to take on the new pets.

“We’re full,” she said. “We don’t have any room. No.”

Ms. Bonner also told the News-Review that Mr. Lesko’s office told her no such move is in the works.

Mr. Lesko could not be reached for comment, although Mr. Walter said he phoned him after Tuesday’s meeting to tell him “the cat was out of the bag.”

He said Mr. Lesko knew already, because reporters had tried to contact him.

Told later of Mr. Bonner’s comments, Mr. Walter said, “I think she doesn’t understand what we’re talking about. This was not meant for public dissemination at this point.” He said he and Mr. Lesko first began discussing the idea after both attended a meeting of the state Pine Barrens Commission.

Members of Riverhead’s shelter committee on Monday voiced immediate opposition to the potential move.

“No way,” said committee member Connie Farr, who is Rex’s wife. “If I lose little Fluffy and I have to go to Brookhaven to retrieve my dog, and I live in Riverhead and I paid all my taxes, I would be very [angry].”

Her husband on Tuesday said, “This is not the answer to the problem.”

Mr. Farr said any solution to the animal shelter issue must include the removal of ACO Lou Coronese, who has clashed with shelter volunteers and who recently came under fire for his handling of a case involving a pit bull named Bruno that was euthanized in December, and for previous animal crime convictions.

“I didn’t propose that idea,” Mr. Walter said in an interview Friday when asked about the previously expected move to remove Mr. Coronese from shelter position and place him into another town position. “But we have taken appropriate actions with Lou and that’s a personnel issue and I can’t go further than that.”

“Other things probably will happen in the not-so distance future if I’m successful,” the supervisor added.

Councilman Jim Wooten, who is the Town Board’s liaison to the shelter advisory committee, said Friday that no matter what the plan is, he thinks Mr. Coronese should be moved to another position and that the town should work more cooperatively with volunteers at the shelter.

Dogs kept at the shelter are usually either dogs picked up as strays or dogs surrendered by their owners.

Statistics from the Riverhead Police Department indicate that in 2010, the town impounded 155 dogs. In addition, 54 dogs were surrendered and seven more were either found dead after car accidents or brought in dead by owners for cremations. The town got 105 dogs adopted and 98 dogs — including the dogs found dead in the streets — were returned to their owners, and 13 were cremated. Of the 13 cremated dogs, eight dogs had been euthanized.

Chief Hegermiller said two of those eight dogs were euthanized for health reasons, leaving only six dogs having been put down last year because they were deemed unadoptable by shelter officials.

*tgannon@timesreview.com*

**with Grant Parpan**

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