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Riverhead Animal Shelter vet bills raise questions

By [Tim Gannon](#) | March 10, 2011 in [News](#)



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Records from Riverhead Town's animal shelter dating back several years show that the town has spent money treating and sometimes euthanizing cats, which the shelter is not required by law to handle. The total bill could not be determined but the records show expenses of hundreds of dollars each on some of the cats.

The records also show several cases in which the town appeared to have paid veterinary bills for dogs after they had been claimed by their owners or adopted.

In one instance, the town paid \$43 to treat a goat.

The records include seizure and disposition reports that are filled out when a town takes in a dog, as well as bills from veterinarians treating animals brought in by the town. The records were acquired through a Freedom of Information Law request by Gail Waller.

Ms. Waller is a Glen Cove resident who says she has donated more than \$25,000 of her own money to help dogs from Riverhead's shelter, usually through RSVP, a nonprofit rescue group. She said she began looking into the records after the town police chief, David Hegermiller, who oversees the animal shelter, called her in 2009 asking for money to support two dogs that would otherwise have to be euthanized.

Town officials had varied takes on the records.

Supervisor Sean Walter said he saw no problems.

"Suppose a cat gets hit by a car," Mr. Walter said. "What do you want the officer to do? We take it to a vet, and if he can fix it, he does. If not, the cat is humanely euthanized. Nobody is doing anything nefarious.

"We take in dogs that have been abandoned by their owners," he continued. "That's been the town policy. I don't know if it's a good policy, but the reason for it is because if we don't, they will either let it loose or chain it to the front gate of the shelter."

Mr. Walter said numerous town officials had gone through all the bills Ms. Waller obtained.

"We don't see a problem," he said.

He said he couldn't comment on specific bills.

But Councilman Jim Wooten disagreed. "There are some problems," said Mr. Wooten, who is the Town Board liaison to the animal shelter. "It looks like there's an inordinate amount of money spent on cats, first off. There seems to be problems with the dates. There are some records that show dogs coming in on one day yet having been adopted out the day before. And then you'll see some coming in and going out in three days and then a month later they'll be getting work done at Kent animal shelter and the town is picking up the bill for it.

"There's evidence there of dogs being adopted out without even being spayed or neutered. I'm hoping it's just a record-keeping snafu because if this is anything other than that, and even that is problematic, but something more than that could be a real problem."

Mr. Walter said he'd been through the records and believed they reveal no major problems. Animal activists are bringing these issues up, he contended, because the town has kept animal control officer Lou Coronesi, with whom the activists don't get along, and moved animal control officer Sean McCabe, whom they liked, to another position in town.

Mr. Wooten also has called for Mr. Coronesi, who has been at the town shelter since 1999, to be moved to another position.

Ms. Waller, who has been publicly critical of Mr. Coronesi, turned the records over to Mr. Wooten, who in turn made them available to the News-Review. The files contain records dating from 2005 to 2010.

Here are some of the cases Mr. Wooten felt stood out:

- A pit bull mix with a broken leg was picked up by the police department and dropped off at East End Veterinary Emergency Center on Route 58 at about 5:35 p.m. on June 23, 2008. Animal Control Officer Lou Coronesi later transported the dog to Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital. The town received bills of \$482 from EEVEC and \$819 from Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital. Someone adopted the dog seven days later on July 2, 2008. Then on Aug. 28, 2008, the same dog was neutered at Kent Animal Shelter, and the \$60 bill was sent to the town.

- On July 6, 2006, an injured Jack Russell terrier that had been running at large on West Main Street was picked by a civilian and dropped off at Kent Animal Shelter. The man thought the dog had been hit by a car, according to the town report. The dog was transported to Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital the same day and treated for a broken pelvis. The town was billed \$559 for treatment of the dog, and the bill was dated July 20, 2006. Yet the town's dog seizure and disposition report show that on July 18, 2006 the dog was adopted by the same man who had brought it in to Kent.

- On June 21, 2009, a shepherd mix running at large was picked up by police on Route 58 with a large abscess on its back. It was taken by police to EEVEC, then transferred to Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital the next day. The town was sent a bill of \$503 from Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital dated June 22, 2009, yet the seizure report indicates that the dog was redeemed by its owner the same day, with the owner paying only \$45 to redeem the dog.

- The town was billed \$190 to treat a cat at Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital on Aug. 29, 2005. Likewise, on Oct. 5, 2005, the town was billed \$238 from Aquebogue Veterinary Hospital for treatment of a cat, which also was euthanized that same day, according to the reports. That same animal hospital sent the town a bill for \$150 on Feb. 20, 2006, for treatment of a cat that included an antibiotic injection, a "clip and clean," and amoxidrops.

"There seems to be an inordinate amount of cat stuff there," Mr. Wooten said. "We do not, under state Agriculture and Markets Law, have any responsibility for cats. I can see if a cat was injured and we have to pay for euthanizing it, but there are some bills that show we paid \$43 for an office visit for a goat. Who's goat is it? And why did the town pay \$43? And where is this goat now? I don't understand."

The goat was treated at Aquebogue Veterinary Clinic on May 31, 2006 and the bill is described as being for an "office visit."

Mr. Wooten said the town shouldn't be spending money on cats. There have been proposals to expand the shelter to include cats, but he said that in other towns that have tried it, cats eventually overwhelmed the shelter.

Supervisor Walter said he was hoping to work out an intermunicipal agreement with Brookhaven Town to share some animal control services. Brookhaven currently doesn't have any room to take in dogs from Riverhead's shelter, but he said he had met with Brookhaven Supervisor Mark Lesko and Councilwoman Jane Bonner Monday and discussed a variety of potential agreements the two towns could look into. They could include making a new shelter Brookhaven is considering building in Medford into a regional shelter that both towns could use.

Chief Hegermiller, who's signature is on all of the bills since his department took over control of the animal shelter from the sanitation department several years ago, said the town had met with Ms. Waller about a year ago. He said that he, Mr. Walter and Mr. Wooten were present.

"We said show us one incident where you think there's a problem and we'll look into it and that never happened," the chief said.

Asked why the town would be spending hundreds of dollars on cats, the chief replied, "Why would we do that? We don't handle cats."

He said he couldn't comment on specific incidents without seeing the reports. The News-Review faxed copies of several of the reports to his office Tuesday night, but Mr. Hegermiller was out of the office in a meeting Wednesday and had not responded by press time.

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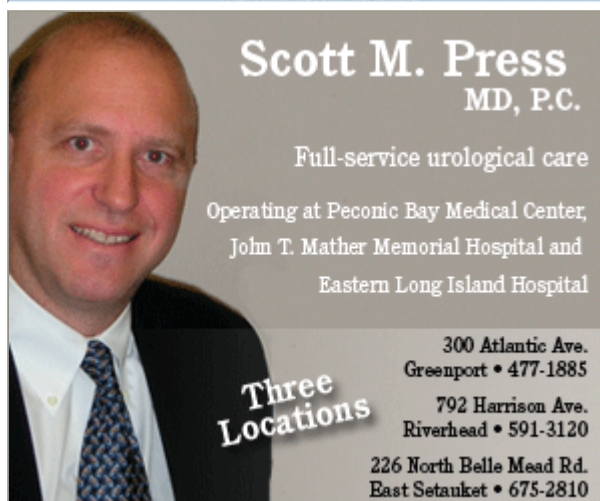
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