

ANIMAL CONTROL

The Issue

Animal control involves the enforcement of by-laws set out by cities and municipalities to regulate, control and license animals -- primarily dogs -- that live in communities.

Animal control contracts vary across communities but normally involve enforcement duties such as picking up stray dogs, issuing citations for unlicensed animals, picking up dead animals from roadways and responding to by-law complaints. Half of the 32 branches of the BC SPCA are involved in animal control. Animal Control Officers use education and enforcement tools to encourage compliance with by-laws concerned with companion animals and public health, public safety and licensing.

The reason the BC SPCA became involved in animal control originally was threefold:

1. to ensure that animals in communities were treated to a higher humane standard of care than that offered by some private contractors;

2. to allow animals to have longer stays in facilities -- over and above the mandated time periods for keeping animals prior to euthanasia

3. to offset costs of operating animal shelters that provided a wider array of services to the public than strictly dog pound facilities. In seeking public feedback, the BC SPCA asked the public if it should continue to be involved in animal control, as it exists now. Feedback was also invited regarding how to deal with aggressive dogs and how to change attitudes in terms of non-compliance to municipal pet-laws.

Public feedback

Many submissions do not support the BC SPCA being involved in animal control, as it exists now, citing that animal control leads to unnecessary killing. Some submissions suggest that conducting animal control is in direct opposition to the BC SPCA's mission to prevent cruelty to, and promote the welfare of, animals. A pound is legally obligated to collect and dispose of stray and dangerous dogs, while a shelter's role should be focused on maximum adoption of animals. The question arises: can the BC SPCA both kill and save animals and fulfill its mission? Many of the large unsocialized dogs that come in to shelters have suffered neglect or abuse. Some suggest the BC SPCA could have reduced the number had it maintained a stronger focus on cruelty prevention.

Some submissions point out that the BC SPCA spends more time giving out tickets to people walking their dogs off-leash but under control, than it does preventing cruelty or enforcing the PCA Act. One participant indicated that the BC SPCA should not act as tax collector for municipalities. Other participants noted that at least one branch has duties written into its contract with the municipality that have nothing to do with animals or animal welfare: enforcement of watering bylaws and picking up bicycles.

Submissions from staff and former staff members support the BC SPCA remaining in animal control. They go on to say that the reason the BC SPCA took over municipal pound contracts was due to the poor manner in which pounds run by municipalities handled and euthanized animals. It is also suggested that animal control officers, through their contact with the public have the opportunity to educate and create awareness of animal welfare issues.

One staff member made a lengthy submission in which he concluded that animal control contracts provide the Society with substantial opportunities to improve the lives of the animals it serves in the community. He states the opportunities stem from the BC SPCA's resources, funding, training, experience and contacts. In his view, involvement with animal control dramatically increases the Society's ability to rescue those in immediate danger or distress.

Breed banning as a way of dealing with aggressive dogs is not strongly supported. Some suggest that strict breeding laws be established and enforced. Animal breeders could be licensed and monitored, with perhaps a special license for aggressive breeds. Most feel that owners are the problem, not the breed. More education and training is recommended for people who adopt a breed that tends to be aggressive. One submission notes that banning breeds may simply cause other breeds to become popular which usually leads to overbreeding and eventually over-population of those breeds. Also, it is noted, "where do you draw the line on what is defined as aggressive"?

In terms of municipal by-law compliance, submissions state that awareness and education may lead to improved attitudes, noting that people may become more responsible if they understand the ramifications of irresponsible ownership.

Some point out that by-laws now in place must be more strictly enforced, such as spay/neuter by-laws, tethering laws and laws regarding dangerous, roaming and off-leash dogs.

Some submissions suggest that animal control should be left to local government with the BC SPCA providing animal welfare guidelines under which municipal contractors would operate.

Some submissions note that the BC SPCA is not open for business when people need help: weekends, evenings and statutory holidays. When people find straying dogs, they either cannot access the owners' name and number because the BC SPCA is closed, or they are told that there is nothing the BC SPCA can do after hours. One submission states that the caring for the well-being of animals is NOT a 9 to 5, five-day a week job – it's 24/7. It is suggested that resources be allocated to create an on-call service to ensure that animals at large can be picked up after hours to prevent harm to them, or to make it possible to reunite a pet with an anxious guardian.

Also submissions note that some rural areas have no animal control or BC SPCA nearby. This results in lack of prevention or little enforcement of laws against cruelty.

Recommendations

It is the view of the independent panel that the BC SPCA's reputation has suffered because the public believes that it has put the business of animal control ahead of animal welfare.

Cruelty prevention, education and advocacy appear to have an unacceptably low priority, and many participants in this public consultation are asking whether the BC SPCA can truly say, "it speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves". The BC SPCA must decide whether the heart and soul of the organization is based on business relationships with municipalities or with animal welfare. We understand the reasons why the BC SPCA became involved with animal control. However, in our view, animal control is a municipal issue and should be left to municipalities.

With this in mind, we recommend that the BC SPCA consider getting out of animal control as contracts expire and put additional effort and resources into prevention of cruelty, education and advocacy, which are the foundation of its mission. While there would be a loss of revenue initially, we are of the opinion that the public would be highly supportive of this strategy, and would give the BC SPCA the opportunity to increase revenues through targeted fundraising initiatives

Our specific recommendations call on the BC SPCA to:

Short-term

⇒ Decide in the next six to eight months whether or not the BC SPCA will get out of animal control.

⇒ Provide municipal pounds with BC SPCA standards of animal care and make them accountable through inspections.

Long-term

⇒ Develop agreements with municipalities that operate their own animal control to turn adoptable dogs over to the BC SPCA - adoptability to be determined by qualified animal behaviourists.