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Manatee animal advocates sway county commissioners

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MANATEE -- There's an old actor's axiom about never sharing a scene with kids or animals.

County commissioners learned the rule first hand after an abandoned puppy now up for adoption shared the spotlight with a little girl who told the board that budget decisions had nothing to do with who is highest "on the food chain" but "it's about what's in your heart and soul."

It didn't take long for the two commissioners who had flagged the animal services budget for further information and consideration to "deflag" it.

Allie Francey, the pony-tailed little girl who took to the podium to convince commissioners to keep the county's budget for animal services intact, told the board that she's been helping out animal organizations for a while now.

"I love to go help with the dogs and cats," she said. "It would make us sad if all the work we've done is wrecked."

Even though she could barely reach the microphone to speak, Allie later admitted to commissioners that Thursday's hearing was not her first government meeting.

Eloise Leibe, 11, soon followed.

"If this adoption center gets cut, the world will be a bad place," she said. Her dogs were a comfort to her grandfather when he was dying of renal cancer she told the board. He looked forward to coming by and seeing the dogs. "When he was in the hospital before he died he said woof, woof for the dogs," Eloise said.

But it really didn't take the kids and puppies in the audience to convince commissioners that residents care about the county's adoption services and don't want that budget to be cut. About 30 minutes before the meeting a crowd of about 350 animal advocates gathered across the street from the county commission building, waving signs, walking dogs and shouting their support for shelter animals.

Denise Deisler, executive director for the Humane Society of Manatee County, announced to the crowd that the commissioners had received more than 1,000 letters and e-mail in support of the county's adoption

services and keeping the Animal Services budget fully funded.

Manatee county budgets usually garner a handful of speakers at public hearings, commissioners said, and rarely get the kind of attention or elicit the kind of passion that this one did.

Many in the crowd wore green shirts in support of animals, or with dog or cat logos. There was also jewelry, including an “I Love Dogs” pin, and people carried photos of their adopted animals. It seemed everyone had a story to tell about a rescued animal and several people brought their dogs with them, some were rescues, others were not.



The cause enticed Manatee High School student Allison Cosgrove, 16, to attend her first rally for a cause.

“I love animals and I don’t think they should be killed,” she said.

At the meeting several people spoke out in support of not only keeping the county’s adoption services, but taking it further toward the goal of making Manatee County a no-kill community.

Scott Clulow told commissioner that by making Manatee County a no-kill county they will be able to save money on animal services in the long term.

“As animal advocates we are very supportive of trying to make this a no-kill community,” he said. “Instead of being short-sighted, let’s save money the right way.”

Laurie Crawford, who is on the county’s Animal Services Advisory Board, said that keeping the county’s adoption services will help move the county toward becoming a no-kill community.

Barb Keegan said that by cutting adoption services the county will be moving back to “the dark ages” when kill rates were higher and animals coming into the shelters weren’t vaccinated or treated for illnesses.

Commissioner Joe McClash, who originally flagged the animal services budget for further consideration, was the first to speak after all of the public comments.

“We did it again,” he said. “All we have to do is have a little controversy to get a crowd out.”

McClash said he is impressed with the county’s new downtown adoption center, which is far more visible than the county’s animal services building in Palmetto.

“We need more of that,” he told the crowd. “It was a mixed message that got out. I didn’t have the intention of cutting what the administrator presented.”

Rather, he said, his idea about sending animals from the county shelter to pet stores where they could be sold, was more about expanding pet adoptions.

Commissioner Donna Hayes who “co-flagged” the item, said she too was just looking at ways to outsource the adoption services. “I was trying to get you to think like we do,” Hayes told the crowd packed into the commission chambers. “We have all of these services to look at. Our challenge is to see if there’s a more efficient way to do this.”

Carol Whitmore, county commission chairwoman, then asked McClash and Hayes whether they wanted to leave the flag on the animal services budget for further discussions in July.

“Flags aren’t about the budget,” McClash said.
“The purpose of flagging is about getting more information. It was never anything about reducing the budget.”



Hayes quickly responded that she wanted to “de-flag” the item if McClash would agree.

He did.

Whitmore promised to bring back a proposal to make Manatee County a no-kill community once the budget is approved and that the plan will not cost the county any money beyond what is already in the budget.