

— no more homeless pets

What a Difference a Year Makes

The crowd filling the room is growing increasingly restless in the 105-degree heat. As the speaker climbs on a chair trying to still the rumblings, angry shouts drown out his attempts to restore order. Security is called in.

The whole scene is beginning to take on the look and feel of *The Jerry Springer Show*. In fact, it's a public hearing in a normally sedate library in Northridge, California — one of six emotional, vituperative meetings about a proposed ordinance to curb pet overpopulation in Los Angeles.

The speaker climbing up on his chair is Dan Knapp, Los Angeles' new General Manager to the Department of Animal Services and ardent proponent of the measure.

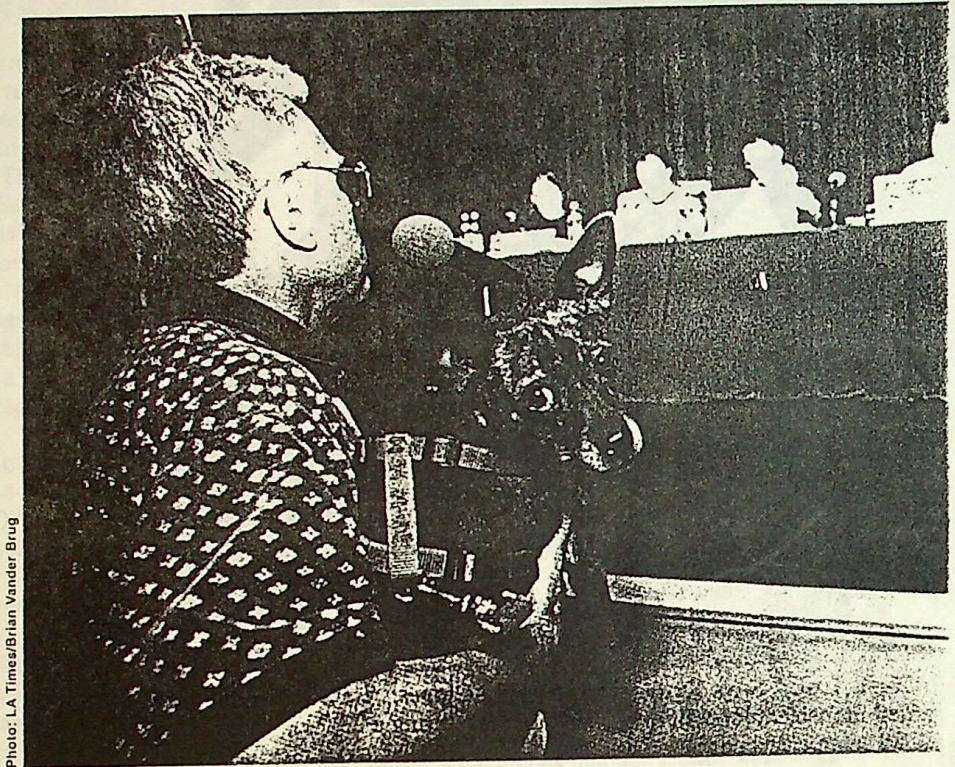


Photo: LA Times/Brian Vander Brug

► By Carol Long

When he first assumed his post last year, Dan Knapp told Best Friends that he was going to open the first no-kill facility in the city's East Valley shelter as part of his ambitious goal of bringing to an end the killing of the city's homeless animals within "five to seven years."

Exactly one year later, L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan joined Knapp at the East Valley shelter where it was officially designated the city's first Life-Oriented Facility — the first major step in the plan.

Steering the city toward a new relationship to homeless animals has been difficult, with a multitude of factions and special interests blocking the way. For Knapp, passage of the new Pet Overpopulation Ordinance that requires breeders and other owners of unneutered animals to pay an annual license fee is a vital step in his mission.

There are an estimated 44,000 stray dogs in the city, many of which run in packs, and three million stray cats roaming the streets. Under the new ordinance, all owners of unaltered animals are required to purchase an annual \$100 permit. Breeders have to pay an additional annual \$200 for a breeding permit. The bill has raised a tremendous outcry among those who consider themselves responsible breeders. They say they are being unjustly penalized for the carelessness of others while ignoring the fact that they profit off the sale of animals and that all other small businesses must purchase licenses and pay taxes.

Future meetings following the Northridge "riot" took place in

larger auditoriums with Knapp and the Commission seated high up on stages away from the audience. Security was increased and a new tough-looking Commission leader named Al Avila demonstrated an amazing ability to quiet the more irate audience members with a terse growl.

Breeders and pet owners opposed to the ordinance accuse Knapp of being a Nazi. Others, perhaps aware that he is a former minister, say his policies are offensive to certain religions. Always the courteous diplomat, Knapp described the audience as "very interactive."

Meanwhile, supporters of the bill, responsible pet owners, and those in the trenches working every day to find homes for homeless animals are fighting just as ardently for the bill's passage. They recognize the value it could have for the thousands, even millions, of animals that will be saved from a homeless life.

Many tears have been shed at the public hearings on both sides. One 26-year veteran of Animal Control who has had to deal with all these unwanted animals began crying while pleading for the measure's passage. But, too often, rescuers' comments at the earliest meetings were drowned out by boos from the opposing members of the crowd. Verbal altercations erupt both inside and outside of the meetings. A few almost turned into a brawl.

Los Angeles already requires dog breeders to hold a license. But of the many thousands of breeders in the city, only *three* actually have taken one out. When one of the Commissioners queried the breeders as to why they didn't hold the appropriate license

already, there were muttered excuses about being afraid of the city's three-animal limit. "Maybe the rescuers will find out where we live and steal our animals," explained one of them.

For his part, Knapp believes that beyond the excuses and the aggression lies the simple fact that people who are breeding dogs and cats simply cannot face up to the reality of the problem they are creating. They won't recognize what is happening to animals on the streets.

"They looked at me and said, 'There is no pet overpopulation problem,'" explains Knapp. They live in a world where *their* pets are loved and cared for. They think the problem is somebody else's."

Some breeders even tried to argue that there aren't any so-called "purebred" animals to be found in animal shelters. This led the Amanda Foundation's Terri Austin to gather people from various local breed rescue groups to a public hearing. She invited CNN, too. The Chihuahua Rescue group alone brought 70 homeless rescued purebred Chihuahua pups. Each dog present, Austin explained, represented up to 100 additional homeless dogs currently being housed at the rescue centers. CNN later took the issue nationwide when their cameras accompanied Austin on a tour of the city's crowded East Valley Shelter where purebred animals await their fate right alongside the "mutts."

Still, the breeders cannot believe that they are part of the problem. Dan Knapp again: "When I explained that we find homes for 11,000 to 15,000 animals a year and we take in 81,000, one remarked: 'Well, it's collateral damage. We cannot play God.'"

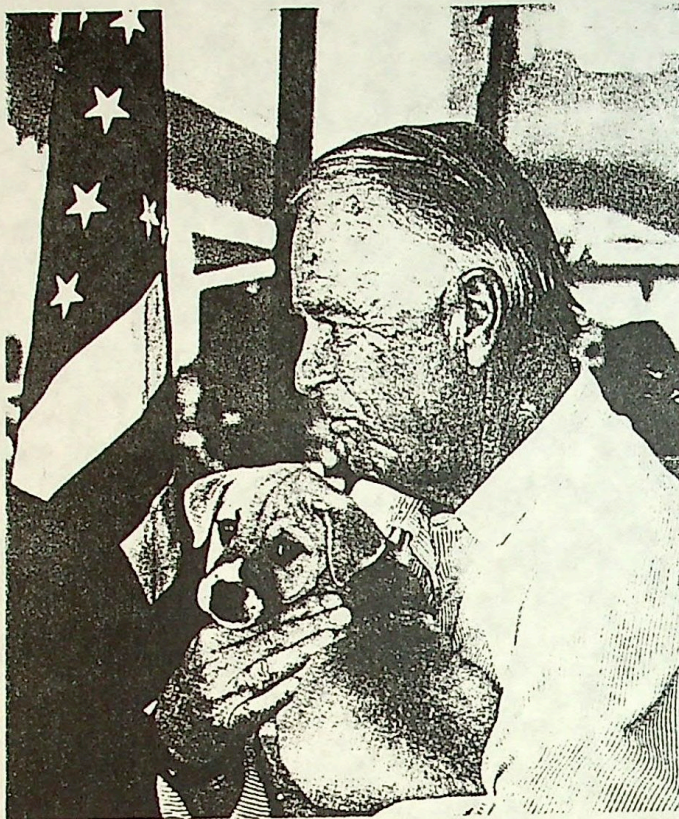
"I said, 'Come with me to where I work and spend a day in the euthanasia room with me. When we leave, I will ask you if you're tired of playing God.'"

Not all breeders are turning a blind eye to the plight of homeless animals. Gabrielle Forman, a law student and former breeder, believes there should be a moratorium on all breeding until the overpopulation problem is under control. She supports the new ordinance with simple logic. "If you are going to play golf, you pay greens fees," she says. "Besides, you can go to the pound and get *any* purebred."

Many have questioned how the law is going to be enforced, leaving Knapp to try to quell their fears. "Are we going to call all these people on Day One and say, 'I know who you are and where you live and you owe us money'? Of course not. The goal is to get the animals spayed or neutered, not to make criminals."

Since his appointment as Animal Services Director a year ago, Knapp has changed the face of animal welfare in Los Angeles. Two important new groups have been created. With celebrity donations from Laura Dern, Brooke Shields, Jack Lemmon, and others, the new Coalition for Pet and Public Safety has bought two mobile spay/neuter vans (Neuter Scooters) to bring free services directly into low-income neighborhoods. And the new Partners for Life coalition of 13 local humane groups is working with the city's Department of Animal Services to find homes for homeless

“Euthanasia is not an acceptable alternative any more. . . we have to move towards life.”



Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan at the East Valley shelter, now designated L.A.'s first city Life-Oriented Facility

pets. (Not long ago, most of the private humane groups were working *against* the city – and often even against each other, so great was the overall sense of frustration and despair.)

In a recent ceremony, L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan officially designated the East Valley Shelter as a new Life-Oriented Facility, with the goal of placing 100% of all adoptable dogs and cats into new homes. Trained volunteers from the groups comprising Partners of Life and Animal Services will be on hand at the shelter to greet the public and offer spay/neuter vouchers, free dog training, and counseling for potential adopters. People wanting to abandon their pets to the shelter get counseling, too, instead of automatic acceptance of their hapless animals who stood little chance of ever finding a new home.

To many animal lovers in L.A., the changes this year seem small and the road ahead still very long. But while it was impossible to drive through South Central L.A. a year ago without seeing starving and injured homeless dogs wandering the streets, today you can cruise the streets of South Central and sometimes barely see a single desperate animal. They're still there, but the situation is so much better.

There is finally hope that No More Homeless Pets is a goal that can be realized, that this sprawling, diverse city will one day really live up to its name and become the City of Angels. 🐾

Carol Long manages the Best Friends Help Line in Los Angeles. Donations and volunteer offers can be made to:
Los Angeles Department of Animal Services (213) 485-8542
Partners for Life (818) 710-9898
Coalition for Pet and Public Safety (877) SPAY-4-LA