

County Commission Asks Sheriff To Oversee Animal Control, Explores Inmate Costs

By Karen Gould

Rising inmate health care costs and tension over the county animal shelter were among discussions Mackinac County commissioners had during their committee-of-the-whole meeting Thursday, August 4. After Commissioners received an update from Sheriff Scott Strait on inmate health costs, they asked him to take over supervision of the Animal Control Officer, a responsibility that initially was held in the sheriff's office, and by county ordinance still belongs there.

In an attempt to deal with tension between Animal Control Officer Bob Robach and the Mackinac Animal Aid Association, and faced with the possibility that the Animal Aid group will no longer care for the animals after the county's 10-day obligation for care ends, commissioners asked Sheriff Strait to take over supervision of animal control, including Mr. Robach and the department's budget, but learned he did not want it and state law does not mandate he take the responsibility. Commissioners decided to conduct more research on the situation.

The discord at the shelter surfaced last month when Mr. Robach told commissioners his phone had been removed and he was getting his mail late and a letter had been

opened.

Commissioner Jim Farero said he visited the shelter earlier in the day and the Animal Aid Association had purchased their own phone, and Mr. Robach's phone is there and hooked up, though it is difficult to use. He also noted that Mr. Robach had month-old mail on his desk.

"The place was clean," he added.

The supervisory responsibility did rest with the Sheriff's Department before it was transferred to the County Administrator approximately four years ago. Commissioners eliminated the administrator's position early this year and, since then, Mr. Robach, who is a retired chief corrections officer, was not assigned a new supervisor.

The animal control officer is not responsible for the county shelter. The county has an unsigned agreement with Ginger Valentine for operation of the facility.

The commission's intention is to shift the supervisory responsibility to the sheriff because the county's animal control ordinance, which was adopted June 27, 1997, states in its title that it is "an ordinance to regulate the existence, ownership, use and treatment of dogs, cats, and other animals in the

County of Mackinac for the purpose of protecting the health and safety of the citizens therein; to establish the office of Animal Control Officer within the Mackinac County Sheriff's Department, and to define the duties and authority thereof..."

"I think he (Mr. Robach) has to be accountable to somebody and I think the sheriff is the logical place," said Commissioner Joe Durm.

The 1997 ordinance stipulates that the sheriff or deputies shall be the animal control officer, that every deputy officer shall be a deputy animal control officer, and that the sheriff can appoint additional persons as needed.

"I knew that this was coming and at this point, I don't want it," said Sheriff Strait. "I don't want it and here's why: There isn't sufficient budget and I don't foresee a sufficient budget coming anytime soon to run the animal control properly. I've got my hands full with the mandatory duties that I have as sheriff, rather than take on more responsibility with animal control, especially since it seems to be in some turmoil. So I would respectfully say, I don't want it."

"We want you to take it over to eliminate some of this turmoil," said Commissioner Carl Frazier.

"I think we need to follow the ordinance," said Mr. Farero.

Commission Chair Dawn Nelson asked if the ordinance mandates the assignment. Sheriff Strait explained that animal control is not part of the mandatory sheriffs' duties set forth in the State Constitution. He did add that in a year or so, he might consider taking on the responsibility.

"Without doing any research on the issue, I believe the sheriff is correct," County Prosecutor Clayton Graham later told *The St. Ignace News*. "The county board cannot add duties to the office of the sheriff. The sheriff's duties and responsibilities are set via the state constitution and state statutes. The fact that the ordinance states that the animal control shall remain under the authority of the sheriff is not binding on him."

In another Sheriff's Department matter, prisoner health care costs have been rapidly rising and, if they continue on the current track, will run close to \$100,000 by the end of the year. So far this year, the county has paid to Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) \$49,950.26, however, the county only should have paid \$35,000, Sheriff Strait said.

"As of right now, I think that we've overpaid Blue Cross \$14,000," he said. "I am waiting

for them to get back with me to explain why there's this discrepancy."

From March 8 through May 14, he said, there were 44 medical transports over the 67-day period. A transport, he explained, can be from the jail to the hospital, dentist, private doctors, and Hiawatha Behavioral Health.

When he realized costs were rising, on May 15, he initiated several cost saving measures, including setting up a program with Vital Care to screen all medical requests. Before the program was set up, the county was obligated to take inmates to the doctor if the inmate so requested. Now, the nurse is screening the requests and transports and medical costs are dropping, he said. Transports between May 15 and August 3, a 82-day period, fell to 15 trips, down from 44.

The nurse is on duty about four hours a day, two days a week.

Part of his new program includes making inmates pay \$10 to see the nurse, but he said if they are unable to pay, they still can see the nurse. "We don't deny them," he said.

The sheriff's plan also includes the nurse screening inmates' prescription medications because, while in the jail, the county must provide inmate medications. For example, brand name medications are changed to generic, when possible. If a medication is for acne or some other non-critical issue, the nurse contacts the doctor to get

those types of prescriptions rescinded. Prescriptions also are filled based on the days the inmate will be in the jail.

Transports, other than emergency room trips, now are scheduled by the nurse. Health screenings, which are mandated by the Michigan Department of Corrections for inmates in jail longer than 14 days, also now are done by the nurse, he said. Since May 15, the nurse has done 20 health screenings. Before that inmates were transported to the doctor and the county was billed for the visit.

For inmate medical care, the county works with BCBS through a discount program, not an insurance program, explained Sheriff Strait. When an inmate has a medical charge, BCBS will investigate to see if the inmate has insurance that will cover the bill. If not, BCBS pays the doctor or care provider. BCBS negotiates a reduced price with the doctor, which is typically 20 percent. Then, for doing the insurance investigation and filing paperwork, BCBS adds 10 percent onto the reduced price for an administration fee, and that is what the county pays BCBS.

Commissioners invited Sheriff Strait to attend their Committee of the Whole meeting Thursday, August 18, at 5 p.m. when two Mackinac Straits Hospital staff members will give them information on all county insurance procedures.



LaSalle Class of 1985 Gathers for 20-Year Reunion

LaSalle High School Class of 1985 hosted a 20-year reunion Saturday, July 16. Classmates attending were (back row, from left) Brent Garries, Brian Closs, Patrick Allers, Ronn Farr, Rocky Young, Scott Schlehuder, Trey Law, Sean Reavie, Jim Bentgen, Richard Marshall, Matt Matson, Andy Brown; (middle row) Heidi (Raimer) Bryant, Janice Schimmelpenny, Sheri (Massey) Oja, Kathleen (Massey) Smith, Carmen (Stimac) Marciniak, Cathy Paquin, Tracy (Laver) Wilson, Eleanor (Benson) Grondin, Shelley (Bagbey) Izzard, Victoria (Houts) Drust, Lisa (Lichlyter) Stratton, Patricia (McKenzie) Ramsey; (kneeling) Jennifer Ferguson, Caroline LaRocque, Shannon (Akers) Doran, Abigail (Harju) LaLonde, Penny (Allers) Shires, Rhonda Wolfe, and Sissy (Sayles) Matson.

August 20 Set for Hiawatha Trail Celebration at Paradise

Hiawatha Shore Trail Day Saturday, August 20, at Tahquamenon Falls State Park in Paradise. Activities will take place at the Lower Falls Pavilion from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and include shuttles for hikers walking the trail between the lower and upper falls, arts and crafts for kids, interpretive hikes, and displays. There will also be giveaway items and coupons to hikers for free soft drinks or ice cream.

The event is held this year in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST)

and is sponsored by the Hiawatha Shore-to-Shore Chapter of the North Country Trail Association.

North Country is a premier hiking trail that stretches more than 4,600 miles across New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. When completed, it will be the longest continuous hiking trail in the United States. The Hiawatha Shore-to-Shore Chapter is responsible for 122 miles of trail that begins at the Mackinac Bridge and meanders through state and national forests and ends at the mouth of the Two

Hearted River on the shore of Lake Superior. Chapter members have adopted sections of the trail, which they hike yearly to report on areas that need maintenance.

The North Country Trail Association is a non-profit

organization solely devoted to the exploration, construction, and maintenance of the trail.

For questions regarding membership or local chapter information, contact Karen Sandberg of St. Ignace at 643-7607.

Andy Vaal Named to MSU Dean's List

Andy Vaal of Cedarville has been named to the Dean's Honors List at Michigan State University for the spring 2005 semester.

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