

June 29, 2007

I have been reluctant to publicly address my experience with the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter (WCRAS). However I have received numerous requests from community members, animal advocates and fellow County employees to document the facts surrounding my tenure as Director of WCRAS. As a public servant, I feel it is crucial for government to be transparent. Incidents of negligence, incompetence and unfairness should be documented, to prevent the same mistakes from occurring again.

In my general experience as an employee of Williamson County, I feel as though I was treated very unprofessionally, particularly by Commissioner Boatright and Commissioner Covey. The lack of planning and forethought involved in WCRAS was highly irresponsible, but what is more disturbing is the blatant apathy and disregard to the many warnings given to the County of the impending failure of the shelter's plan.

When the County decided not to renew their animal sheltering contract with the Williamson County Humane Society, Commissioner Boatright headed up the initiative for the County to build its own shelter. Commissioner Boatright's assistant, Kathy Grimes, was placed in charge of research and planning for the entire project. It is very evident from her proposed plan for the shelter that she was grossly unqualified to take on this task and that she had no experience and knowledge of budget preparation. Apparently she also did not have experience with animal shelter operations. The total initial budget proposal was \$458,907. It was presented to one of the participating entities in March 2006 for the operation of a 15,000 square foot facility to take in approximately 7,000 animals annually. It consisted of the following:

- only five staff members (Director, Shelter Manager and three kennel workers) to cover shelter operations for seven days a week, 365 days a year
- no staff for front desk/customer service
- no staff for office administration
- no line item or funds for animal medical care (vaccines, antibiotics, sodium pentobarbital, sedatives, Heartworm test and FeLV/FIV test, syringes and needles, parasite treatments)
- no funds or plan for spay/neuter of adopted animals (Chapter 828, Texas Health & Safety Code)
- no funds for microchips for adopted animals (Chapter 828, Texas Health & Safety Code)
- no line item or funds for dead animal removal service
- no line item or funds for basic building service contracts (maintenance, janitorial service, lawn care, facility repair, pest extermination, courier service for revenue, property insurance, software maintenance)
- huge deficiencies in funds for existing line items (\$250.00 for office supplies, \$2,800 for computer equipment, \$1,850 for office furniture, etc.)

Even though this plan was objected to and questioned early on and repeatedly by the community and animal welfare advocates, no one bothered to check facts or assess the

feasibility of the plan. This plan was brought to each participating city by Ms. Grimes and was apparently accepted by the cities because of the projected cost savings with such a low operating budget. The cities accepted the plan and budgeted for the following year the amounts detailed in the plan. An inter-local agreement was formed.

Even before accepting the job (April 2006), I voiced grave concerns about the insufficient budget, staffing and animal capacity and the message communicated to me by Kathy Grimes, who was my only liaison on this project, was “we’ll work with you”. She assured me that their plan was an initial effort and that they were waiting for the Director’s input to finalize the plan. I sent her, from Chicago, a document I created listing the Humane Society of the United States’ recommendations for minimum staffing levels for animal shelters and a list of necessary staff position descriptions needed to run an animal shelter.

I concede that I was naïve in thinking that if the County was willing to spend \$4 million on the animal shelter, it followed that there would be a sincere desire to do what it would take to make this project successful. I was continuously reminded there had been references to how dissatisfied the County was with the services being provided by the Williamson County Humane Society. This led me to believe they wanted to create a more progressive and operationally sound venture with this project. They did a national search for a shelter director and hired me because of my past experience with progressive animal welfare programs, which impressed upon me that they wanted an outstanding program. Not only was I not able to implement the types of progressive programs that were my strong suit in the past, but I was unable to fulfill the basic operations required to properly run an animal shelter and adhere to the current state laws governing shelter operations.

I did eventually get the underestimated budget increased for funding spay/neuter, vaccines and microchips (to comply with state law) contingent on projected revenues through adoption fees. Yet, the staffing issue was ignored and I was advised to acquire volunteers for all tasks to lessen the workload of paid staff. However, there are many basic operations that should only be performed by trained staff for safety and liability concerns. Also, there needs to be an adequate amount of trained staff to cover shifts every day of the year as well as allow for sick time, vacation time and possible medical leave due to injuries, as the work is very physical.

At the very start of my employment in late July of 2006, I tried to caution and advise the Court of the serious deficiencies involved in the project. I supplied written documentation of staff and budget comparisons of other shelters in Texas that received a comparable number of animals a year. There was unwillingness by this Court to address the critical issues perhaps because of a reluctance to tackle such weighty concerns as their terms were nearing closure. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a definite pattern of denial that was evidenced from the inception of this project. These same issues (capacity, staff number and budget) have repeatedly surfaced throughout the whole process and will have to be addressed at some point without the “quick fix” attempts that are currently being implemented.

When I tried to express my concerns at the first meeting of the committee comprised of participating cities' representatives (later to become Board members) in August of 2006, they went back to their city managers with these concerns and it came back to the Commissioners. I was then called by Commissioner Boatright to meet with him at his office where he advised me not to say anything negative about the project to the other city representatives on the committee. In September of 2006, Commissioner Limmer did accept my request for two veterinary technicians (to administer paraprofessional veterinary treatment to animals, conduct temperament testing on animals, supervise the handling of controlled substances, and provide daily supervision of the kennel workers) and pushed it through at Commissioners Court.

This action, it turns out, was not done properly because the other participating cities (future Board members) would have to approve this amendment to the budget. No one had a clear understanding of how the Board was going to be functioning independently of the county commissioners. I was a County employee, but 50% of my salary was also being paid by the other participating entities, so therefore I was also accountable to them. At no time during my employment with the County did anyone take responsibility to ensure that I was trained in even the basic protocols and procedures for operating within the expected parameters of County government. No chain of command was established, no forethought was given even to where my office would be until the shelter was built. Luckily for me, Joe Latteo, the Director of Building Maintenance who oversaw the construction of the animal shelter, took me under his wing and gave me much needed direction. He found an empty office for me at the Juvenile Justice Center and there I was left to fend for myself. I was never given any oral or written directives, expectations, or goals for my position (except by Commissioner Boatright to not communicate anything negative to the participating cities).

With the many fruitless attempts to advise the Court of the impending doom of the animal shelter project, I was hopeful that the new Court starting in January of 2006 would be more responsive. However, when Commissioner Covey was not yet sworn in as Commissioner in the fall of 2006 and was asked while sitting in the audience in Court whether she would consider taking the County representative position on the animal shelter Board, her response to the Court was "whatever". After she took office in November, she agreed to be the representative due to the shelter being in her precinct.

Commissioner Covey continually refused to listen to my professional advice and instead met frequently with Kathy Grimes (who was furious with me for pointing out the inadequacies of her research and budget for the shelter) and Julie Kiley, from the Auditor's Office regarding matters of the animal shelter, both of whom have no experience in animal welfare. Both seemed very intent on convincing the Commissioner of my incompetence. At Board meetings she would come with Ms. Grimes and refute any of the suggestions that I offered to make the shelter more progressive and successful. For example, increasing the professional services budget to hire a veterinarian once a week to perform spay/neuter surgeries and rabies vaccinations for adopted animals; to provide enough funds to vaccinate animals upon intake to control disease; and to have the

shelter open on Sundays and past 5:00 pm on weekdays to increase adoption and redemption rates and volunteer participation.

Commissioner Covey repeatedly ignored my pleas for assistance and continued to tell me that I would not receive more staff. The participating cities were powerless to adjust funding due to the set budgets already passed by their city councils. She paid no attention to my concerns about working seven days a week, 14 hour days to try to set up operations, train staff and cover the front desk. From the period of March 4, 2007 when the County started receiving stray and unwanted animals temporarily at the Show Barn in Georgetown (until March 14, 2007 when the shelter officially opened) to April 22, 2007 (48 days), I did not have a day off from work. By March 17, 2007, three days after opening, the shelter was at full capacity. On March 21, 2007 the initial Shelter Manager resigned and the following day one of the Animal Care Specialists quit. Staff members continued to acquire overtime in order to give proper care to the animals, keep the facility sanitary and control the population. Concerned family members of staff came to the shelter to help and try to alleviate some of the stress and workload. In April, it was Judge Gattis and his assistant, Peggy Vasquez who took action to help me keep my head above water. Judge Gattis secured the cadets from the Juvenile Justice Center to come and help clean kennels for an hour a day, six days a week, and then after a month, three days a week. He also added a temporary full-time administrative position to work the front desk and a temporary part-time administrative position to help with office duties that were both paid for out of the Judge's budget. He attempted to acquire six additional staff paid for by the County, but was met with resistance by Commissioner Covey and Commissioner Birkman and his proposal was tabled indefinitely.

Commissioner Covey could have recognized the County's past mistakes and rectified the situation. She was in a position to accept the County's blunder of poor planning (the ultimate responsibility lies with the County who sold the project and not the participating cities) and have the County properly fund the shelter until an agreement could be reached with the participating cities, as Judge Gattis tried to do. Instead, she tried to blame the problems at the shelter on my staff and me, claiming we were not cleaning fast and efficiently enough, even though she was well aware of the inadequate capacity levels at the shelter. Because every cage was generally occupied, the dogs could not be shifted through the guillotine door separating the kennels so that one side can be cleaned while the animal is on the other side. Instead, every dog needed to be taken out of their kennel and placed into a portable crate outside in the back parking lot. And then these crates needed to be disinfected between holding different animals, which created double cleaning. Interestingly enough, Commissioner Covey also contradicted herself on this issue. Before the shelter opened, one of her replies to my pleas for more staff was that she "didn't care if it took staff all day long to clean the animals' cages". I disagreed with her on this because I don't think that animals should not have to lie in their own waste all day.

Another component Commissioner Covey blamed on me was that I had failed to set up a volunteer program before the shelter opened. This actually is untrue because my standard operating procedures that were completed in January of 2007 include a volunteer

program. At an April Commissioners Court meeting, when I was at the stand to report on the animal shelter update, I mentioned the need for more staff. Kathy Grimes stood up in the audience and stated that the shelter's plan included heavy use of volunteers and that when she was at the shelter the previous week, she had not seen any. I replied that if I didn't have to clean kennels and work the front desk everyday, I might have had time to train volunteers. Aside from not having the time, I deliberately did not start training volunteers right when we opened, because I wanted to have operations running smoothly and staff fully trained in a brand new building and operation before bringing in volunteers. Additionally, volunteers are not the panacea for a shortage of staff for basic operations that should be covered by paid, trained and insured staff members. For liability reasons, volunteers should only be allowed to handle animals that have passed a temperament and health evaluation by trained, knowledgeable staff. And volunteers should not handle revenue transactions at the front desk.

Commissioner Covey repeatedly set me up to fail with impossible goals. At a May, 2007 Board meeting, Commissioner Covey complained to me that I should have had revenue generating programs in place before the shelter opened to alleviate some of the budgeting problems. This was the first time any mention had been made about my responsibility for fundraising. I fully agree that fundraising and generation of revenue producing programs are the responsibility of the Director, and because there was not a staff person to manage the volunteers, I was fully willing to take on this responsibility as well. However, in my opinion, my first and foremost obligation was to physically set up the new shelter, set standard operation procedures, hire and train staff, and try to figure out how the shelter was going to comply with state statues given the unreasonable budget and staffing allotments, which I did for the previous eight months before the shelter's opening. When I worked at Chicago Animal Care and Control, I did set up very successful volunteer, foster, educational and revenue producing programs. But it took years to grow and develop, and that was within an already established organization.

Additionally, she instructed the County department heads at IT and Internal Audit to no longer allow their employees that had been at the shelter trying to help work out computer and front desk issues to come to the shelter to assist. And ironically, it wasn't until June 1, 2007, the day after I left, that Commissioner Covey and her entourage came to the shelter to "volunteer" and help with the situation. Additionally, after I left, she requested that the County employees that previously assisted at the shelter return to help out.

The most unprofessional treatment given to me by Commissioner Covey was the April 24, 2007 Board meeting executive session agenda item she added which was "Discuss and take appropriate action on Animal Services Director". I was not aware of this agenda item until about an hour before the meeting, because I was not emailed the agenda like I previously had been by Commissioner Covey's assistant. I was completely blindsided and learned (confidentially) minutes before the meeting that Commissioner Covey had met with Round Rock city managers the previous week to advise them to have the Round Rock Board member vote to terminate me when it came up for a vote. The executive session lasted about two and a half hours and I was called back into the meeting where I

was told that I had several deficiencies that needed to be addressed and that a committee comprised of Commissioner Covey, Lt. Drawbaugh (Round Rock Board member), and John Willingham (County Human Resources Director) would be formed to assess my job performance for a 60 day period. My only assumption is that Commissioner Covey had attempted to fire me without any warning and without any previous communication to me of my job expectations and performance. I assume she was unable to secure the remaining three votes on the Board and instead was setting up this committee with two allies to terminate me in 60 days. This was two days after my 48th straight day working marathon and three days after a very successful grand opening event. The performance plan had three concerns:

- “You have made public comments concerning the need for additional shelter staff that caused city and county officials, along with members of the community, to question the effectiveness of the regional shelter’s operation.”

When making these comments, I was simply doing my job as a public servant to tell the truth of the impossible situation at the shelter. As indicated previously, my attempts to appeal to the County were ignored.

- “You have not followed county fiscal policies and procedures.”

Again, I never was given any formal or written training and had to do all of the administrative duties and office work myself, as I did not have any administration staff. The Animal Services Department is the only County department that had absolutely no administrative support staff. It was impossible to keep up with these duties on top of all of my other responsibilities with opening a new building and operation.

- “You have not focused your efforts towards the management of your Department to include establishing a volunteer program prior to the regional shelter opening, effectively managing the Department’s budget and staff training.”

As mentioned earlier, I did have a volunteer program standard operating procedure as well as a volunteer application and training protocol established in January, 2007. I chose to not start training volunteers until the shelter was physically set up and staff was fully trained. As for effectively managing the Department’s budget and staff training, I did the best I could under extremely difficult circumstances. I strongly challenge Commissioner Covey to find anyone that would have done better in the situation.

Not once did Commissioner Covey ever acknowledge or express gratitude for the extremely hard work performed by myself or my staff. Instead, it was always a criticism of what we weren’t doing or what we weren’t doing well enough. Her style of micromanaging was blatantly offensive considering she had no knowledge, experience or training in the field of animal welfare or management.

After dealing with Commissioner Covey and seeing that I was in a no-win situation, I applied for an Executive Director position at the Milwaukee Area Domestic Animal

Control Commission in February of 2007 and was fortunate enough to be accepted for the position in May, 2007. The organization is a regional facility with 19 different participating municipalities, has a 2007 budget of \$2,066,400 and had 35 paid staff members.

In closing, I made a strong commitment to this project, moving to another state and purchasing a home. I take my work very seriously and have an excellent track record. I am very grateful for the support and encouragement from the other four WCRAS Board members, Lt. Bob Drawbaugh, Asst. Chief Jerrell Jolley, Joni Clarke, and Lt. Darlene Brown and also Judge Gattis for their help despite the fact that they were restricted in their ability to make the necessary changes to make the shelter successful. I wish great future success to the WCRAS for the sake of the citizens and animals in Williamson County.

Melanie Sobel
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Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter