

It's not an issue of warm and fuzzy, it's one of health, safety, smart economics — and giving the county's inadequately funded Department of Animal Services a boost.

Right now, the county shelter receives up to 37,000 dogs and cats each year. On average, 20,000 of these animals are killed instead of adopted. And get this: It costs taxpayers \$300 to house, then ultimately euthanize these mostly healthy animals. That's where the Pets' Trust wants to make an enduring difference.

The item on the Nov. 6 ballot will not create the Pets' Trust. But a good public showing of support will give the County Commission the go-ahead to seriously consider creating this agency.

The goal is to make Miami-Dade a no-kill county, reduce the stray pet population and get more animals adopted, all good goals.

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In Jacksonville, considered the model, animal euthanasia is down 66 percent; and the stray-pet

population is down 30 percent. That also means fewer disease-carrying animals on the streets and the reduced risk of dog bites and attacks.

In Miami-Dade, mobile units would pick up strays and spay or neuter them for a cost of about \$60. (A smart bargain when compared to the cost of euthanizing.) Cats would be returned to the streets, but unable to reproduce.

The Pets' Trust must not duplicate the efforts of the overwhelmed animal services, but rather make the department's job easier in the long term, with fewer strays to handle.

Correctly implemented, the Pets' Trust can help make streets safer for everyone and get more animals adopted, rather than killed. The Herald recommends YES to ballot item No. 240 on the Pets' Trust.

Vote YES on #240

Miami-Dade's Pets' Trust would be a national model

A poster greets owners surrendering their pets at Miami-Dade Animal Services' shelter:

"We work tirelessly to save as many pets abandoned at Animal Services as possible...But last year, 3,558 of 5,182 kittens (68%), 8,267 of 9,233 cats (90%), 1,139 of 5,166 puppies (22%) and 7,072 of 16,300 dogs (43%) were euthanized because there were not enough homes for them. Please make sure you have exhausted all other options before leaving a pet at Animal Services."

But most people who hand over cats and dogs at the Medley shelter haven't sought other options, much less exhausted them, and neither the stark statistics or frank talk from shelter personnel make much difference.

Gloria Acevedo brought 4-year-old Ariel, the mixed terrier she's had since puppyhood, to the receiving room of Animal Services one day in September.

Wagging her tail, Ariel stared expectantly up at Acevedo, who began to cry.

"I hope someone adopts her," said Acevedo, of Homestead.

Leo Romero, animal care specialist supervisor, knows that's unlikely. Ariel is no beauty. She's had several litters and lost some teeth when she was hit by a car.

He tried to persuade Acevedo to reconsider, suggesting that if Ariel were spayed, she'd calm down —

and if she stayed at the shelter, she'd probably die.

"We can do [the spaying] here for \$30," he said. "She's a good dog and she's very attached to you."

"OK, I'm gonna do that!" she said. But her husband wanted none of it.

"I'm not driving back up here," said Jose Ramos. "You can't keep her."

They headed for the door, leaving Ariel behind. Nine days later, Ariel became one of some 20,000 animals to die this year in the shelter's euthanasia room for the same reason: No one wanted her, and new arrivals needed the space.

The root problem, say animal activists, is overpopulation, and a non-binding question on the Nov. 6 ballot asks voters if they'd be willing to spend a few dollars a year to stop it.

It's called the Pets' Trust, based on the county's Homeless Trust and Children's Trust initiatives, both of which involved voter-approved tax increases.

The Trust would raise about \$20 million annually through a small property-tax increase amounting to \$10 for every \$100,000 of a property's assessed value. The average property owner would pay \$20 a year. Residents who don't own property would pay nothing.

Advocates say it's the only way to achieve the "no kill" objective that Commissioners adopted earlier this year, defined as a 10-percent kill rate.

In the long run, Pets' Trust will

save money, said Michael Rosenberg, the Kendall businessman and civic activist who launched the initiative less than a year ago.

He notes that killing an animal costs \$300 because it must be cared for during the mandatory five-day holding period that gives owners a chance to reclaim, which few do — about 1,500 last year. Many, like Ariel, stay longer waiting in vain for adoption, only to meet their demise.

In contrast, spaying and neutering costs \$65, and is the best hope for resolving the overpopulation crisis, said Rosenberg.

"Taxpayers are not getting a good deal with this current method," he said. "The proof is in the numbers, as we never kill less than 20,000 animals a year, and that is for the past 25 years. That is \$6 million to kill, and it accomplishes nothing."

Pets' Trust would underwrite free and low-cost spay/neuter/vet-care clinics in parts of the county where it's hard to find a vet and residents can't afford expensive services. Spay Neuter Miami Foundation and the Greater Miami Humane Society Adopt-a-Pet do some of that now.

It would also fund responsible pet-ownership and behavior-modification programs, and grants to rescuers so they could spend more time saving animals and less figuring out how to pay for it.

Not only would it dramatically improve the lives of animals in



MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD STAFF
Vet tech Grace Davin looks after the half-dozen pups brought into the shelter on a Friday morning.

Miami-Dade, but it could become a national model, said Lindsay Gorton, Spay Neuter Miami Foundation's president and a Trust booster.

"It's the only model of its kind anywhere," Gorton said. "Whenever I talk to people [in animal care] everyone is shocked that we got something on the ballot."

Rosenberg knows that any tax increase, no matter how tiny, faces an uphill battle. But he's convinced that when voters grasp the scope of the deaths, they'll support it — and if they support it, the County Commission will feel confident in establishing the Trust.

The Herald recommends YES to ballot item #240 on the Pets' Trust.

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sat. Oct. 27, 2012
BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG
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Inside the room at the Miami-Dade shelter where the animals are killed

Michael Rosenberg, the founder of the Pets' Trust, spent one day last March in the euthanasia room of Miami-Dade's animal shelter. Here is his first-person account.

All of my family, friends, and co-workers said not to do it. Do not go into that room. That it was just not worth it because "you would never get the images out of your mind."

Many people say "euthanized" or "put to sleep," two phrases that make it seem a pleasant experience. There is no reason to mince words. They are killed.

Each day, 60 to 70 cats and dogs are taken into Miami-Dade Animal Service's A Ward because there is no more room at the shelter to hold them and no one has adopted them. The county shelter is "open admit," which means it must accept every animal brought in. Some are lucky enough to be adopted or pulled by rescue groups, a handful reclaimed by owners who lost them.

The remainder spend their final moments in A Ward, receiving perhaps the only love and gentleness they've ever experienced. They are the product of Miami-Dade's huge overpopulation problem, the result of not enough spaying and neutering procedures.

I went into that room, too, determined to see for myself what happens there.

The dogs rarely get a single walk during their five-plus day "stay" before they are taken into that room. The kennel staff are far too busy cleaning cages and feeding about 300 dogs and cats every day.

When they are finally taken out of their cages, they think they are in heaven. They think they are going for a walk. To go play. To go run in a park.

That short walk from their cage to A Ward will be their last.

I watched for three hours as 15 dogs were taken into that room, one by one. As the dogs jumped on us, kissing our hands and faces, a tech was entering information into the computer. Accurate records are kept about each death.

When the first dog came in, I was shocked at how normal and healthy he looked. Just a regular dog with his tail wagging as fast as can be. He was so happy. I knew what was coming and I felt sick to my stomach.

The dog was picked up and put on a table. He loved being the center of attention.

One of the techs gently turned the dog's head away from what was coming. Another walked slowly over with the syringe. With the dog looking the other way, the tech gently rubbed a liquid on the front leg and then injected the deadly fluid.

The dog's eyes quickly become glazed, his body slowly becomes limp.

The worst was watching the tail. Each wag became slower and slower, until it finally stopped. In 30 seconds, a dog that

could have been the most perfect companion went from full of life to a corpse that would be taken to the dump.

It was painless for the animal, torture for me.

Even the techs who perform the task sometimes cry.

I could hardly breathe after seeing that. That was my first one. One death. Just one.

I watched this process 14 more times that day. Some of the dogs were so beautiful that I pleaded to the tech, "Can you please save this one?"

The tech looked at me with the saddest eyes. "There is no room," he said. "If you want to save this one, take him back to his cage and bring another one."

Instead, I watched him die.

I watched them all die. One at a time.

I was in that room almost six months ago — or 10,000 deaths ago. For anyone unsure of how to vote on the Pets' Trust referendum Nov. 6, go spend five minutes in Ward A. You'll never get over it.

Michael Rosenberg is founder and president of the Pets' Trust Vote 240, a grassroots effort to create a dedicated source of funding that would help end the animal overpopulation problem and the killing of healthy and adoptable animals.

Vote YES on #240

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Some Supporters of Vote Yes #240



Dog Whisperer, Cesar Milan



Lissette Alvarez



Gloria Estefan



UM President, Donna Shalala