

MIAMI HERALD OPINION

## Whether Miami-Dade does it or someone else, it's time to fix the animal-shelter problem

The long and winding and bumpy road to how best to care for abandoned dogs and cats is leading to County Hall this week, when the Miami-Dade Commission meets.

In other words, the fur's about to fly.

The once-new and improved animal shelter in Doral is over capacity, filled with about 650 dogs when it was built to accommodate only 350. As always, the question will be: How can the county best make this dire situation right? To say that there is a difference of opinion between the county, including Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, and animal advocates is an understatement.

And why are we still talking about this? All of it was supposed to have been fixed with the opening of that new facility in Doral a decade ago. The state-of-the-art shelter was offered up as a better way following the outcry from animal advocates over the county refusing to implement the voter-approved Pets' Trust.

The Trust would have outsourced the care of stray and surrendered animals, financed by property owners, who would pay \$11 a year. Some 500,000 voters approved the measure. But it was only a straw vote, a finger in the wind, and therefore non-binding and easy to ignore.

The harsh reality is that Miami-Dade Animal Services, the agency overseeing Doral's beleaguered Pet Adoption and Protection Center, is drowning in dogs and cats, a deluge of post-pandemic pet dumping, according to Levine Cava. To make matters worse, its director recently was removed and is being sued by a wealthy shelter benefactor.

### FAILED APPROACH

It's fair to say that for too long, the county's way was failing to meet the needs of the animals and, as important, the needs of this community.

Out of necessity, animals have been taken to the old shelter facility in Medley, which had been closed and declared "deplorable." Animal advocates have picketed the site lately, partly because it is not air-conditioned.

Our approach to caring for, sheltering — and preventing — stray and surrendered dogs and cats is broken, and it must be fixed.

Levine Cava says her administration is coming to the rescue. We commend her for wading into this mess and appreciate her initiatives, which should be given the time to prove effective — or not.

She recently issued a well-intentioned three-point plan:

stepping up the spaying and neutering of up to 25,000 animals a year; staging large animal adoption events for the public; and reevaluating all animals at the shelter for behavior problems. She detailed her plan in a recent Herald op-ed.

Cava is on the right track, but is that enough? The Miami-Dade Commission as a whole needs to explore how the shelter's \$34 million budget is being spent, what is going on behind its closed doors and how spaying and neutering fell so far behind.

One difficult question to consider is this: Is it time for the county to outsource sheltering, spaying and neutering animals?

Pets' Trust advocates plan to ask the county for \$10 million to set up three massive spaying and neutering centers. The money, they say, would be a loan to be paid back if the voters approve being taxed to pay for animal services like they do for schools and solid waste.

"Why not pay for animals too?" said Mike Rosenberg, co-founder of the Pets' Trust.

When asked about handing over such a large sum, Levine Cava gave the Editorial Board a solid No, a stance with which we agree. It is clear that her administration, like that of her predecessor, Carlos Gimenez, is un-



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The Pets' Trust, a group of animal advocates want Miami-Dade County to loan it \$10 million for a spay-and-neuter program.

comfortable handing over so much money to an untested group of volunteers — no matter how committed they are to the cause.

Animal advocates, some of whose rabid rhetoric — pun intended — is more off-putting than persuasive, say Levine Cava's solution is short-term. To stabilize the animal population in the county and clear the backlog of unperformed procedures, 100,000 animals a year must be spayed or neutered — and for at least three years.

"Anything less than 100,000 is just a Band-Aid to the problem," Rosenberg said.

### NEW PROPOSALS

In 2012, then-Mayor Gimenez, in the midst of a rough economic downturn, rejected the non-binding straw ballot's mandate, insulting animal advocates in the process. In lieu of the Trust, Gimenez promised to close the outdated shelter in Medley and build the new one, a promise

kept.

Today, that new shelter has all but shut its doors to accepting surrenders and is struggling to accommodate more than 600 dogs.

County Commissioner Raquel Regalado is willing to hear new options. "Ten years since the Pets' Trust has given us clarity. We were told back then that if we built a new shelter, there would be no more problems. But here we are today?" she asked. "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again."

Commissioner Kionne McGhee told the Editorial Board that he envisions a two-step process: creating an advisory board on which the Pets' Trust has a voice in determining the best practices to handle these animals; then asking county voters if, and how, they want to pay for them.

We agree that incorporating community voices into next steps will be crucial. For now, though, let's see if Levine Cava's way is an effective way to the future.