

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Grand jury report rips Orange County over crumbling animal shelter

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A scathing grand jury probe excoriates the County of Orange – and the 18 cities that contract with it for animal care services – for decades of paralysis on replacing its dilapidated animal shelter.

The problem, it said, is a lack of leadership.

“The animal shelter facility is 74 years old and is in utter disrepair,” said the grand jury in the report released Thursday. “Over time, the shelter’s expansion has been limited to the piecemeal placement of sheds, gazebos, lean-tos, trailers, and miscellaneous prefabricated units. Structural integrity, cleanliness and sanitation continue to be compromised and pose serious risks to human as well as animal health.”

The main structure was built in 1941 to serve 200,000 people. Today, it serves more than 2 million people. It is built of unreinforced brick and would probably not survive an earthquake. The county can’t even inspect its roof, for fear it will collapse.

“The county’s lack of leadership, lack of commitment to animal care, and the prioritization of other Orange County Community Resources Department functions ahead of Orange County Animal Care are the primary reasons for failure,” the grand jury said.

This isn’t the first grand jury take on the issue, but it may be the most forceful.

Three other grand jury probes have delved into the inertia over the years, each beseeching the county to act. Officials have been “keenly aware” of the problem for at least 20 years, but intent on putting a new shelter on a (free) 5-acre parcel at the former Tustin Marine Corps Air Station to the exclusion of all other possibilities, this report said. The Navy has taken far longer to clean up that site than many expected, and the county is woefully lacking a Plan B.

“To date, nothing substantive has been accomplished,” the grand jury said. “The county has no backup plan or secondary site selected despite possible locations such as county-owned property at the James A. Musick Facility, county-owned property at the Irvine Great Park, or sites in unincorporated Ladera Ranch.”

Every county in California with more than 500,000 people has at least two animal shelter facilities – except for Orange County, the grand jury found.

Officials have 90 days to respond in writing. Some county staffers felt that the grand jury’s criticisms were too harsh, but Supervisor Shawn Nelson appreciates the frustration.

“I can’t answer for why things happened the way they happened 10 or 20 years ago, and I don’t like the delay either,” Nelson said. “I just want to fix the problem. These are real issues. We’re well aware of them. It’s a priority.”

Twenty years ago, the Board of Supervisors set aside \$5 million for the design and construction of a new shelter, and spent about \$600,000 on various studies. All were ultimately abandoned.

In 2007, animal control duties – and the remaining \$4.4 million – were transferred to the newly created Orange County Community Resources Department. It was tasked with developing plans for a new shelter, obtaining participation agreements from contracting cities, and constructing at least one new facility. None of that has happened.

“From 2007 to the present ... no preliminary design, schematic plan, or conceptual drawings have been developed by OCCR for presentation to any of the contracting cities” or to the Board of Supervisors, the grand jury said. The contracting cities, in turn, “have declined to make any firm commitment to the county to pay their pro-rata share of the capital costs of constructing a new shelter without seeing the scope of the project.”

Since officials seemed stuck, the grand jury reached out to architectural firms that specialize in animal shelters. Depending on square footage, building footprint and site configuration, a preliminary design would run from \$25,000 to \$50,000, it was told.

That’s a tiny slice of the \$4.4 million in the fund, the grand jury noted.

“Two county executives admitted to the grand jury that

schematic plans and preliminary drawings of a new shelter would be quite helpful in presenting a proposal to the 18 contract cities and getting them to 'buy into the project,' but it had not occurred to the OCCR to have such preliminary designs prepared," the grand jury scolded.

That's not just the county's fault, the grand jury said. Cities need to demand a viable plan, with cost and schedule estimates, from the county as well.

It's time to act, the grand jury said. The county should analyze two or three sites for shelter construction, so all parts of the county can get convenient service; and should seriously consider assigning a staffer solely to this task, to make sure it finally gets done.

The transfer of the Tustin land may finally be at hand. The Navy plans to release the last 233 acres to local agencies by late 2017.

"Right now, it would be hard to find a better, more centrally located piece of land than this one," said Nelson, who is trying to nudge everyone toward a business plan. "This helps keep us focused."

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