

Liberty Animal Control, contractor for Fresno County, files for bankruptcy

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Fresno County's animal control contractor is out of business, and the county's hired another company — run by the former contractor's president — to handle the work until a more permanent solution is found.

Liberty Animal Control Services has been under contract since 2012 to handle animal control for Fresno County. On Friday, it filed for bankruptcy, triggering a provision that ended its contract, said David Pomaville, the county's director of public health.

Another company, California Animal Control, will take over for the next seven weeks, Pomaville said. That company is operated by Daniel Bailey, who is listed in Liberty's bankruptcy filing as Liberty's president and 50% owner.

Liberty's contract was set to expire Sept. 30, and the county put out a request May 19 for bids on a new contract, Pomaville, said. Responses are due June 23.

Pomaville said he expects another contractor to be identified at the end of the seven-week interim period with California Animal Control. At a recent meeting to discuss the new contract, Pomaville said six people attended, but he didn't know the number of organizations represented.

"We want the animal control entity to be successful," Pomaville said. "Its certainly a big challenge; they (Liberty) have shined in certain areas and struggled in others."

County Supervisor Henry R. Perea said he's confident that despite Bailey's connections to Liberty, his new company can fulfill its obligations.

"We do have a temporary contract with one of the partners and they can fulfill all the conditions of the prior agreement," Perea said.

Besides Bailey, Liberty Animal Control's bankruptcy filing lists Dr. Charles Wilkins, a Clovis veterinarian, as chief financial officer and his wife, Karen Wilkins was listed as manager. The Wilkins are each listed as 25% owners of Liberty. All three signed the paperwork authorizing the Chapter 7 bankruptcy.

Perea said it had become increasingly obvious Liberty was having financial problems. He said Liberty laid off four people a couple weeks ago; he didn't know whether the layoffs were related to the bankruptcy.

"We were aware something was coming," Perea said. "That's why we laid the ground work for a transition."

Liberty was the only bidder when it took over the county's animal control services on Oct. 1, 2012 under a three-year contract. Supervisors could have added two one-year extensions for Liberty, but last year decided to seek other proposals with the goal of having more than one bidder, Pomaville said.

The county paid Liberty \$750,000 per year. It took over from the longtime county contractor, Central California Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, after CCSPCA announced it wanted to raise its rates. It had been charging the county about \$950,000.

The bankruptcy papers were filed Friday. In the documents, Liberty Animal Control listed its assets as \$36,576 and liabilities of \$91,541. Among the creditors were law firms and their clients in a wrongful termination lawsuit. The case

is yet to be heard and the dollar amount owed is zero.

Becky Holly, a board member with Bully Rescue, said she had heard there were some financial issues with Liberty.

“I think they (the county) need a whole new vendor and they need to spend more money,” Holly said. Both the city of Fresno, which still contracts with CCSPCA, and the county “don’t make this a priority and do it on the cheap, and that’s not fair when you’re dealing with living, breathing things,” she added. “We’d love to see our animal control agencies as leaders in controlling animal population.”

SPCA spokesman Walter Salvari said his agency’s board of directors is in discussions about bidding for county animal control.

“It is something we are entertaining,” he said.

In a related item, supervisors on Tuesday are considering a resolution to buy land at 202 N. Teilman Ave., which fronts the existing animal control facility for construction of an animal shelter and administration building.

The board is being asked to support using \$200,000 in its tobacco settlement funds to buy the 1.3 acres of land. The board previously set aside \$50,000 for an environmental evaluation of the former Fresno County Coroner’s office building adjacent to the acreage being considered for the new shelter.

About \$2 million has been set aside for the new shelter and administration building. It’s proposed to measure about 8,000 square feet under the county’s plans.

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