

# Fresno County gets four proposals to run animal control

By Marc Benjamin  
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Fresno County has four organizations interested in running its animal control program, which was previously operated by Liberty Animal Control Services, the group that filed for bankruptcy in May.

Until a new contractor is selected, animal control is being provided by California Animal Control Services, run by a former Liberty official. When Liberty filed bankruptcy, it triggered the end of its animal control services contract.

The county plans to have a review team evaluate each proposal, and cost will not be the only issue considered, said Gary Cornuelle, Fresno County's purchasing manager.

"It is important because we have to fit it within budget constraints," he said, "But price is only one factor."

Selection of the new animal control contractor is expected to take about a month, county officials said.

The existing contract is for \$750,000 per year under a three-year contract that was originally signed with Liberty in 2012. Before Liberty took over, the Central California Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals charged the county \$975,000.

Supervisor Henry R. Perea, who led the effort to move the county to its own animal control service in 2012, said he wants changes. Perea said money is less important than it was three years ago.

"Staff is going to be looking at the numbers," he said. "What I am going to be looking at is who has the best vision to transition us from the current state to as close to a no-kill shelter as we can become."

The county is in the process of buying land for a new animal shelter. He said negotiations are moving slowly for land at Teilman and Nielsen avenues, the site of the existing county facility. The county has offered \$200,000 for additional land next to the existing site.

He said he wants the county to consider using Juvenile Justice Center land south of Malaga for the new shelter. He said the county already owns the property.

The county will get about \$11 million in one-time money from the state in July. Part of that money — about \$3 million — could pay to build a shelter, he said.

\$3 million

The cost of a new Fresno County animal shelter

Supervisor Debbie Poochigian, the only other supervisor serving when Liberty was approved for its contract, said she was encouraged to learn the county had more than a single option.

"My hope has always been that we have an animal shelter that treats animals humanely and is run efficiently," she said. "We are headed in a different direction, and that's probably a good thing."

Daniel Bailey, who operates California Animal Control Services, said his group has taken steps to improve on Liberty's services during the past month. He said he is partly responsible for what occurred under Liberty, but he was not in control of the finances, which were overseen by veterinarian Dr. Charles Wilkins and his wife, Karen. Bailey and the Wilkinses were all named in the bankruptcy filing, but have since parted ways.

“We are providing a professional, excellent service to the county, and the money is going into the animals,” Bailey said of California Animal Control Services.

Bailey said he was previously not in control of the money, euthanasia or the adoption program.

He said if his group isn’t chosen, they will work hard until the final day of the contract.

“We are not going to leave the animals in a bad state, and we are not going to leave the county in a bad state,” Bailey said.

His former associates, the Wilkenses, also took part in a proposal as the new animal services provider. Andrew Little, a former animal control officer for Liberty and corporate owner of Valley Life Animal Control, said Tuesday the Wilkenses are part of the organization. He declined further comment.

Members of the animal shelter group that filed bankruptcy submitted a proposal under a new name

Central California Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals submitted a bid for the county service. Three years ago, the SPCA said it would no longer provide services to the county or city of Fresno. The city later reached an agreement at a higher price, while the county proposed a contract that resulted in Liberty getting the service. Liberty was the only group to submit a proposal.

Animal rescue groups were critical of Liberty, saying the company had a high euthanasia rate and animal housing issues.

For the new contract, Fresno’s Animal Compassion Team of California, a local rescue group, submitted a proposal.

Brenda Mitchell, president of ACT, has joined with local veterinarian Lee Ann Dumars to submit a plan that she said will change the way animal control is provided in the Valley.

She said her group consulted with veterinary officials from the University of California at Davis to create a plan that makes “every single life important.” Mitchell also said she has commitments to help from several other animal advocacy groups.

“We know the realities of Fresno County,” Mitchell said. “We’ve all faced the challenges and know the reality of Fresno County.”

She said the group attempted to submit a bid package three years ago but couldn’t bring the right people together.

“Last time the county didn’t have a lot of knowledge and didn’t have a lot of options, and they’ve learned a lot over the past few years,” she said. “This time we didn’t back down; we are trying to provide a solution instead of getting mad and complaining.”

ACT is supported in its proposal by the Fresno Bully Rescue, which sent a recommendation letter on ACT’s behalf.

“It is our belief that this team will bring the very best to the county of Fresno, not only in animal control, but in the care, treatment and life-saving of animals as well as education to Fresno County residents,” wrote Becky Holly on behalf of Fresno Bully Rescue’s board of directors.

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