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Local News - Saturday, January 10, 2004

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Tompkins SPCA given top marks

By **DIANA LaMATTINA**

Journal Staff

ITHACA -- If you're a homeless pet, Tompkins County is the place to be.

Animal People, an independent publication, rated the Tompkins County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as having the lowest number of animals euthanized per capita in the nation for the past two years. While the national average is 15 animals killed per 1,000 people, Ithaca had 1.9 in 2002 and 1.8 in 2003, said Merritt Clifton, editor of Animal People.

"It's impressive to see an agency performing 10 times better than the national average," Clifton said. "Knowing that the local SPCA is doing all it can to save the lives of the dogs or cats raises the level of the community's satisfaction in the care for its animals."

According to statistics kept by the Tompkins County SPCA, of the 2,529 animals taken in, 178 animals had to be euthanized in 2003 because of incurable illnesses or vicious behavior. None of the animals euthanized were healthy or considered adoptable, said Nathan Winograd, executive director of the Tompkins County SPCA.

"We've reached our goal of finding a home for all dogs and cats that can be placed," Winograd said. "In the 1990s, the concept of a no-kill shelter was a fantasy. In five years, we've reached that goal."



IRINA PERESS/Journal Staff

A crew from Northeast Construction Services works Friday on the Tompkins County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals new 9,000-square-foot building. An industry magazine has cited Tompkins' SPCA for having the lowest rate of animal euthanizations per capita in the nation.

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The SPCA and other animal shelter agencies are not obligated to report euthanasia statistics to a national organization or to the nationwide American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Animal People created the list from information provided by the independent agencies and continually updates the list, Clifton said.

"Twenty years ago, the movement began to spay or neuter as many animals as possible to keep the overpopulation down," Clifton said. "We're seeing the results of that, as successful agencies are seeing their intake numbers decrease. Now, we're focusing on keeping the animals healthy and alive to be placed in homes."

Stephen L. Zawistowski, senior vice president of ASPCA, said he has reservations regarding the use of statistics to evaluate animal shelters and SPCAs. He cautioned that comparing a large municipal animal control facility to a small no-kill shelter could be misleading because of the difference in the variety and number of animals each accepts.

Zawistowski did say that looking at the number of animals euthanized per thousand humans makes more sense than other methods.

"Overall the goal is to reduce the number of animals in need," Zawistowski said. "The question is: Do the numbers represent the sense of the community? Is the shelter serving the community's needs?"

According to Winograd, of the animals the Tompkins County SPCA takes in, about half are stray dogs or cats. Most of the rest are animals surrendered by their owners. While the local SPCA does not turn any animals away, Winograd said, they have been using a waiting list to have the owner set up a time to drop off the unwanted animal. The SPCA also uses a foster care system to temporarily place animals in the home of a volunteer.

"The shelter's job is to tap into the community and use the resources to save lives," Winograd said. "If the community sees you doing a good job, they're going to share more support to you."

As the local SPCA works to maintain low euthanasia rates at the no kill shelter, it is also looking to expand its services in providing comfort to the animals taken in and the educational services it offers to the community, Winograd said.

A new \$3.25 million SPCA facility, which is slated to open in the spring next to the current Warren Road site in Dryden, is designed to allow the agency to care for three times the animals in a large environment designed to be less stressful to the dogs and cats, Winograd said.

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