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Santa Cruz spay-neuter law serves as model for state

BY SORAYA GUTIERREZ

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

It's for your animal's own good, so say the people behind a law that would require owners throughout the state to spay and neuter dogs and cats by 4 months of age.

The California Healthy Pets Act, authored by Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, would save taxpayers millions of dollars by keeping animals out of overcrowded shelters, proponents say. But critics aren't convinced, and say the government should not interfere with what they do with their pets.

The bill, scheduled to be heard this week, is modeled on the mandatory spay-neuter ordinance in Santa Cruz County, which has been in place since 1995.

Every year, more than 800,000 pets are abandoned in California, and half of those are put to death, according to Judie Mancuso, campaign director for the bill, AB 1634. The price for taxpayers to shelter and ultimately put the stray cats and dogs to death is \$250 million a year.

"This is what we've needed in this state to help animal shelters slow down the tide of animals entering our facilities," said Catherine Smith of the California Animal Control Directors Association.

Local animal advocates credit the county's ordinance for a more than 50 percent decline in the number of animals that are taken to county shelters and ultimately killed by injection.

Before the county required residents to spay and neuter their pets, shelters were taking in 16,000 animals a year, said Jody Cramer, who at the time served as director for the local chapter of the SPCA, and led the charge for the ordinance. Now, shelter statistics show that less than 5,000 animals are taken in countywide.

Lisa Carter, director of the Santa Cruz SPCA, said a similar law statewide would benefit animals that do not have a chance for survival at the many high-kill shelters throughout the state.

"There is no doubt that our mandatory spay/neuter law in Santa Cruz County has greatly reduced the number of animals entering and dying in shelters over the last 11 years," Carter said.

If the state can mirror the success of the Santa Cruz ordinance, the results would save taxpayers \$125 million annually by keeping more than 200,000 animals out of shelters, said Alex Traverso, a spokesman for Levine.

If the law passes, pet owners would be expected to voluntarily comply with the state law, as in Santa Cruz.

If owners are caught with an unsterilized pet, which can happen if a wandering dog or cat ends up in a shelter, they are cited and given 30 days to spay or neuter their pets before a \$500 fine is assessed.

The general manager of the county's Animal Services Authority says all shelters carry a burden of unwanted animals, and a mandatory spay/neuter bill is a good fix.

"No matter where you live in California," said Katherine Vos, "you better have your animal fixed, unless you have a proper permit to breed"

That's where some pet owners disagree.

Fees for breeding permits would be set by local agencies, and pet owners worry the costs would be prohibitive to some. In Santa Cruz, fees for special permits range from \$50 to \$100.

Karen Johnson, director of the National Pet Alliance, said the law would end up preventing Californians from breeding dogs and cats.

Instead of targeting responsible breeders, Johnson said, the solution is to stop feral cats from having kittens.

"How will a mandatory spay/neuter law solve the problem of too many feral cats having kittens?" she asked.

Also opposing the bill are members of the Monterey Bay Dog Training Club, who say the initiative is misleading.

Pet owners who are not responsible now will continue to be just as irresponsible regardless of the law, said Tammy Del Conte.

"Once the real dog and cat fanciers are gone, the public will be left with animals produced from puppy mills and sick, ill-bred puppies brought up illegally from Mexico," said Del Conte, the club's recording secretary.

The bill is scheduled to be heard Tuesday in the Assembly Committee on Business and Professions in Sacramento.

Contact Soraya Gutierrez at atsgutierrez@santacruzsentinel.com.

Healthy Pets Act

- Requires spaying and neutering most dogs and cats by 4 months of age.
- Exempt animals include: Purebred dogs and cats whose owners obtain a permit; guide dogs; service dogs or signal dogs; dogs used by law enforcement agencies; and dogs and cats whose veterinarian determines it would be unsafe to spay or neuter them.
- Local animal control agencies would be responsible for enforcing the law.
- A portion of fines collected would be used to expand the availability of free or low-cost spay or neuter programs and other outreach efforts.

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