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Healthy Pets Act could save millions of dollars

Lloyd Levine

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The California State Assembly has passed Assembly Bill 1634 - the California Healthy Pets Act - by a 41-38 vote. If enacted, this legislation would require most pets in California to be spayed or neutered.

I authored this measure because every year, nearly 1 million cats and dogs pass through the doors of animal control agencies throughout California. And every year, more than 50 percent of them - many perfectly healthy and adoptable - are euthanized by overcrowded shelters which are unable to find them good homes.

Perhaps those numbers don't bother you, but this one might: Collectively, our state and local governments are spending 259 million taxpayer dollars to house and care for dogs and cats in animal shelters each year. That figure doesn't include the cost of killing and disposing of about half a million dogs and cats each year. When you include those costs plus the intake and processing costs, the total price tag climbs to well over \$300 million each year. In addition, stray dogs roam through many neighborhoods, increasing the danger of dog bites and the transmission of rabies.

Under AB 1634, dog and cat owners who don't comply would be cited if their pet comes in contact with a local animal control

officer, but will be given time to spay or neuter their pets before a fine would be assessed. A portion of those fines would be used to expand the availability of free or low-cost spay and neuter programs.

The vast majority of people I've spoken with about this measure are very supportive. We've received over 7,000 letters of support in my office, hundreds of phone calls, and many willing volunteers asking how they can help get AB 1634 signed into law. These people come to us from animal shelters, rescue

groups, law enforcement agencies and veterinarian groups - a wide array of backgrounds united by the common goal of reducing the number of pets needlessly killed each year.

But with any high-profile legislation there is always a vocal opposition as well, and in this case, breeders from across the nation have gone on the offensive. They will stop at nothing to defeat this common-sense measure - even if it means calling local Assembly members and threatening them with relocating their AKC National Championship out of Long Beach. These threats were made



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despite the fact that this bill very specifically and expressly exempts show dogs and animals from out of state.

I commend Long Beach-area Assemblymembers Laura Richardson and Betty Karnette, who would not be bullied or intimidated by these unfortunate and undeserved threats. They read the legislation and noted the exemptions and had the courage to join me in trying to address the severe dog and cat overpopulation problem in a responsible way.

This legislation already contains a number of common-sense exceptions, including for show and sporting dogs, law enforcement dogs, dogs used in search and rescue, cats or dogs who are too old or in poor health, and guide, service and signal animals. But we will continue to try and address everyone's concerns while crafting the strongest possible piece of legislation.

If signed into law, Assembly Bill 1634 will not only establish California as a national leader in the humane care for animals, but it will save our state's taxpayers millions of their hard-earned dollars.

And if you're not convinced, consider this: The bill is modeled after a highly successful mandatory spay and neuter ordinance that has been in place in Santa Cruz County since 1995. Within two years of the county's adoption of the measure, it began to see a noticeable reduction in the number of animals entering its shelters. Within eight years, despite a 15 percent growth in the county's human population, the number of animals entering the county's shelters had been cut 60 percent. This example shows just how effective AB 1634 can be if given the chance.

Lloyd Levine, D-Sherman Oaks, represents the 40th Assembly District in the California Legislature.

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