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Wildlife rescue group looking for new shelter

By Peggy Goetz

Irvine World News

Pacific Wildlife Project has housed hundreds of sick, injured or otherwise rescued wild animals in the “extra” building at the city Animal Care Center since 1996.

The organization came there on an emergency basis in the wake of the botulism outbreak among brown pelicans at the Salton Sea in Riverside and Imperial counties.

The organization now takes in for treatment or rehabilitation dozens of species of animals at the shelter on Oak Canyon, but that is to end by Sept. 1, according to city and project officials.

The city wants to expand its operation into the space to accommodate the growth of Irvine’s population from 40,000 to 160,000 since the shelter was built in 1980, according to Community Services Director Deanna Manning.

Linda McLeod-Evans of Pacific Wildlife said city officials once gave verbal promises that her group would always have a home in Irvine. She said the program has no place to go and will have to cease operating.

Manning said Wednesday that city officials have spent time looking for alternatives for Pacific Wildlife. They have spoken to several other rescue organizations that will take most of the animals. They have also considered other locations in the city, but none have turned out to be feasible for what Pacific Wildlife needs.

“Linda is a good person and she wants to do the right thing. And we want to do the right thing,” said Manning, adding that she is willing for the city staff to still help her find a solution for the animals.

McLeod-Evans said she received a phone call from city Community Services Supervisor Gil Gonzales in October saying Pacific Wildlife would have to leave the shelter in April. At that time she thought she would be able to move to part of the city’s Turtle Rock Nature Center. She planned to build flight cages for pelicans and other larger birds.

Manning said that Gonzales was just beginning his job as supervisor at the time and may have given McLeod-Evans an indication that using the Turtle Rock site would be feasible.

However, Manning said that about that same time officials decided that the nature center would become the southern headquarters for the city's open space program. The ponds and large flight cages that McLeod-Evans wanted to build would not be compatible with the site, said Manning, so the city had to withdraw the offer. Officials decided they would have no animals on the site and removed animals that had been at the nature center as well.

"It just wasn't working," said Manning.

McLeod-Evans said it is ironic that someone asked her organization to take the animals from the nature center.

In January, the wildlife rescue organization hit another stumbling block. The Animal Care Center and the Pacific Wildlife Project came under a five-month quarantine for birds of all kinds when a rooster at the center had a suspected case of Newcastle disease. Center Director Ron Evans said all the farm birds at the center had to be destroyed in January, which included the rooster, chickens and geese.

That quarantine was lifted in May, but McLeod-Evans said that the state is still under quarantine and that none of her birds can be placed out of state because of the quarantine, and no in-state permanent placements are possible at this time.

Newcastle disease is a serious threat to the chicken and turkey industry. It is an untreatable, highly contagious and fatal disease of fowl.

McLeod-Evans said she has asked "everywhere" for space for her all-volunteer, nonprofit service but has been told "no room at the inn" or has been referred to someone else. She was even referred to herself by one conservancy group, she laughed.

Manning said she thinks McLeod-Evans was given plenty of notice. She pointed out that when Pacific Wildlife came to the shelter in 1996, the arrangement was on an emergency basis and that the first agreement to stay was for one year. The group was first housed in the whole unused shelter building for which it paid \$1,000 a month, Manning said. It now uses half the building, or about 30 kennels, for \$300 a month. After the first year, the arrangement was renewed at six-month intervals, she said.

Manning pointed out that the program started as a temporary thing to house pelicans from the Salton Sea and has grown to be something else without any real input from the city. She said the city has been telling McLeod-

Evans for a long time that she would need to find other arrangements.

McLeod-Evans said all recent arrangements have been verbal and that she is not aware that her stay had been on a six-month renewal basis.

Manning said use of shelter space has not been expanded since the facility opened in 1980 and that space for cats is particularly short. She said she hoped planning for renovation of the additional building would begin as soon as the wildlife program leaves.

Exact use of the space has not yet been determined, but she said there are a number of possibilities being considered.

The city's population has multiplied by four since the shelter opened, and it is bound to keep growing and along with it more shelter space will be needed.

But the injured and rescued wild animals still have no home, said McLeod-Evans, and she sees no hope of one on the horizon. McLeod-Evans said that the unique services her group offers include taking in all species of animals, including common species that are often routinely destroyed by other groups.

They also do field rescues and will go out to bring in injured animals. They also provide a unique volunteer experience and community service credit for youths, she said.

Of particular concern for McLeod-Evans is the fate of the birds that cannot be released because of the nature of their injuries.

"They will have to be killed," she said.

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