

Public Hearing Testimony

FY 2026 Operating Budget

April 7, 1:30 p.m.

Animal Services Advisory Committee

Jennifer Hughes, Chair

Good afternoon, Council Members. I am Jennifer Hughes speaking on behalf of the County's Animal Services Advisory Committee -- a group of 11 County residents, appointed by you, and charged with advising the Executive and the Council on all matters related to animal services. We take our charge very seriously and want to speak to the proposed budget for the Office of Animal Services. We understand how difficult and unstable the economic situation is in the County, and I personally don't envy your task in producing a fair and sustainable budget for FY 26. But I am here asking you to at least maintain the proposed FY 26 budget for OAS.

Ms. Hairfield has been the Executive Director for just over a year. In that time she has worked to reorganize and streamline the Office of Animal Services so that her mission -- ensuring that the animals in MCASAC and throughout our county are treated humanely and properly -- is fulfilled. Her staff has also worked hard to increase the number of onsite and foster volunteers, as well as forge stronger relationships with community-based animal welfare organizations to broaden the volunteer and nonprofit resources available to take care of the animals in need throughout the County. Despite these efforts, OAS is still on the brink of not being able to properly care for and feed the thousands of animals that pass through its doors every year as well as animals throughout the county.

OAS is also one of the first agencies likely to feel the community's pain as the economy suffers. With many of our residents out of jobs, more of them are likely to surrender or abandon their animals due to financial hardship -- increasing the number of animals in OAS's care. If you were to reduce OAS's resources just as its workload is increasing, the outcome for the animals is likely to be dire.

On that note, we are also requesting that you find \$30,000 in operating funds for a more dependable pet food bank that can be critical to keeping animals out of the shelter, off the streets, and with their families who love and cherish them. This food can be distributed through an existing network of volunteers and non-profits so there would be no additional strain on OAS's staff. This \$30,000 investment would leverage hundreds of hours of volunteer time and other donations, while paying for itself many times over. The cost to the taxpayer of each animal entering the shelter is nearly \$1000. Keeping 100's of pets in their homes by helping to feed and vet them is far wiser than taking them into the shelter or letting them be out on the street. Since the County changed its community grant mechanism, there is no opportunity for groups like MCPAW to receive grants for this purpose.

We also want to ensure that the \$125,000 you provided last year for a community spay/neuter program is preserved. As noted in the Maddy's fund report, this program is critical to stemming the tide of unwanted animals being born, and entering the shelter, or being abandoned. Again, the dollars spent on this program pay for themselves through avoided costs.