County commissioner: ‘I think there’s going to be some shot dogs’

Eureka Township tables animal control

BY CORY SMITH
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EUREKA TOWNSHIP — As Montcalm County Sheriff’s Deputy Charlie Mahar provided a monthly report last week, a concern from Eureka Township officials emerged.

With the recent closure of the Montcalm County Animal Shelter due to county budget cuts, Eureka Township Trustee Brad Kelly expressed worry during the board’s Oct. 9 meeting that a situation he recently witnessed involving several loose dogs posing a threat would become all the more common.

Mahar told Kelly that going forward, calls to law enforcement involving animals would remain shrouded in uncertainty. “With the closing of the animal control, there was a little lag there where we weren’t really sure what we were going to do,” Mahar said. “But deputies will respond to ‘dog at large’ calls.

We’re going to do the best we can. We don’t have the same equipment, but we will respond, issue citations and warrants, and try to take care of it.”

Mahar said a misdemeanor warrant was issued in the case that Kelly mentioned; however, Mahar added that while the department would respond to calls involving animals, it may not always be able to resolve them.

With Montcalm County Commissioner Tom Lindeman in the audience, township officials directed their concerns to him about the future of animal control.

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services at the county level.

Lindeman said the county has hired an animal control officer whose duties will be to handle the record keeping of animal licenses in the county treasurer’s office. But regarding stray or dangerous animals, Lindeman could not provide a definite answer.

“There’s some talk about her being able to go out and pick up a dog during the daytime hours for the sheriff’s department. But at night and weekends, it’s going to be the sheriff or the city police,” he said.

Mahar said the idea that local law enforcement would be handling any responsibilities of animal control is a misperception.

The sheriff’s office has not provided 24/7 road patrol coverage for the county due to budget cuts since 2012, and aside from contracts for deputies dedicated to specific municipalities, Mahar said expecting a deputy or a Michigan State Police trooper to provide animal control services would be unlikely.

“We’ve received an order from Sheriff (Mike) Williams, we’re not going to be picking up any animals,” Mahar said.

“We’ve been ordered not to pick them up and put them in our patrol car as we don’t have the proper training or equipment. A lot of these animal control calls, they aren’t going to be handled by anybody.”

With the situation remaining in flux, Lindeman did not paint a hopeful picture going forward.

“If we get things under control, I would expect the county commissioners to take it (animal control) back and bring in an animal control person and resume the operation as it was pre-budget crisis,” he said. “But until then … I think there’s going to be some shot dogs.”

Mahar concurred, stating in his career he has witnessed a dog being shot by a law enforcement officer three times, but anticipates without an animal control service available, that statistic could increase as the safety of the public remains a priority.

With concerns remaining regarding the future of animal control services, the board again entertained a proposal from Angela Hollinshead, president of the newly established Humane Society of Mid Michigan.

Hollinshead approached the board in September and requested $4,587 in funding for one year from the township for the Humane Society, which officially opened Oct. 9.

Hollinshead is in the process of approaching every township in Montcalm County with requests to assist in funding the non-profit agency. Her proposal consists of eventually hiring an animal control officer who would be available during regular business hours to handle calls of stray or dangerous animals. For townships that contract with the Humane Society, those services would be available.

Currently, all employees at the Humane Society are working without pay on a volunteer basis.

After having a month to sit on the request, the board decided to wait another month before potentially making a decision. According to Supervisor Rod Roy, the township is able to contract services with the Humane Society as long as those services are mandated as animal control services, such as stray dog retrieval, calling it a “legal dispersement of township funds.”

“Animal control is a state statute to be handled by the county, but they aren’t doing it because of budget restraints,” Roy said. “I think this is a viable scenario, where somebody else is going to have to pick it up if we have problems.”

Township board members deliberated back and forth as to whether they should commit funds for services.

“I have a great concern that it’s going to be, if we support it and sign a contract, that it would be something we would have to deal with (permanently),” Trustee Elaine Pendrick said.

Pendrick feared if local municipalities begin picking up the bill, county officials would never feel the need to return animal control services to the county budget.

“I understand your concern, why would they take it back over if we’re paying now? But on the same token, if we’re concerned about this service for our constituents, how do we balance that?” Trustee Jeremy Austin asked.

Board member decided to table the issue of potentially funding the Humane Society until November to see how the situation is discussed among other township boards.

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