

**State of Texas  
County of Bexar  
City of San Antonio**



**Meeting Minutes  
City Council B Session**  
City Hall Complex  
San Antonio, Texas 78205

**2021 – 2023 Council Members**

Mayor Ron Nirenberg  
Mario Bravo, Dist. 1 | Jalen McKee-Rodriguez, Dist. 2  
Phyllis Viagran, Dist. 3 | Dr. Adriana Rocha Garcia, Dist. 4  
Teri Castillo, Dist. 5 | Melissa Cabello Havrda, Dist. 6  
Rosie Castro, Dist. 7 | Manny Pelaez, Dist. 8  
John Courage, Dist. 9 | Clayton Perry, Dist. 10

**Wednesday, March 22, 2023**

**2:00 PM**

**Municipal Plaza Building**

The City Council convened a regular meeting in the Norma S. Rodriguez Council Chamber in the Municipal Plaza Building beginning at 2:02 PM. City Clerk Debbie Racca-Sittre took the Roll Call noting a quorum with the following Council Members present:

**PRESENT:** 11 – Nirenberg, Bravo, McKee-Rodriguez, Viagran, Rocha Garcia, Castillo, Cabello Havrda, Castro, Pelaez, Courage, Perry

**ABSENT:** None

**ITEMS**

1. Briefing on the Animal Care Services Strategic Plan. [David W. McCary, Assistant City Manager; Shannon Sims, Director, Animal Care Services]

City Manager Erik Walsh introduced the Item and mentioned that the process focused on best practices research, community engagement and input, and stated that the briefing today was to solicit feedback from the City Council on the Animal Care Services (ACS) Strategic Plan. City Manager Walsh recognized the work of the ACS Board and invited the Board Chair Rita Braeutigam to introduce the Plan.

Shannon Oster-Gabrielson, Assistant to the ACS Director, provided an overview of the strategic planning process which began with a community survey and meetings. Oster-Gabrielson listed community concerns such as stray and roaming dogs and safety of both humans and animals. Oster-Gabrielson reported that staff and partner organizations were also consulted and they provided guidance on goals and objectives for the Plan. Finally, the ACS Advisory Board were interviewed and provided feedback at a retreat.

Oster-Gabrielson enumerated the results of best practices research which included partnerships for placement of animals, community assistance and resources for pet owners, mandatory spay/neuter, trap/neuter/return surgeries, behavior and enrichment programs to make pets more adoptable and keeping pets out of shelters through proactive partnerships and programs.

Director of ACS Shannon Sims presented the comprehensive Animal Care Services Strategic Plan which included five focus areas: 1) Support a safe community for people in their neighborhoods, 2) Protect the safety and provide humane treatment of pets, 3) Support the placement of pets for life, 4) Foster positive connections with the community, and 5) Empower a healthy and thriving workforce.

Assistant ACS Director Brad Davenport provided strategies for immediate action which included development of policies and procedures to address bite cases through criminal citations for unrestrained pets off-property and initiate a home quarantine policy for less severe cases where the animal was not off premises or was restrained. Davenport outlined a new process to handle dangerous dogs as defined by State Law which included a realigned focus of field operations on dangerous dogs, expanded compliance hearings with Municipal Courts, simplification, improved access to make reporting easier for residents and coordination with San Antonio Fear Free Environment (SAFFE) Police Officers. He stated that SAFFE Officers were a program of the San Antonio Police Department (SAPD).

Davenport outlined a six-week polit program in City Council Districts 2 and 3 which included a proactive community oriented canvassing process which would include a focused approach by case managers. The focused approach included resources (humane restraints and microchips) and education for pet owners with the goal of preventing free roaming pets. Davenport noted that State legislation was proposed that would protect victims or those reporting dangerous dogs and increase penalties for not properly constraining a dangerous dog. Sims listed a timeline for the adoption and implementation of the Strategic Plan.

## DISCUSSION:

Mayor Nirenberg thanked the ACS Advisory Board Members for their service and leadership in the process and also thanked the community for providing input. Mayor Nirenberg clarified that there was a policy session scheduled for April 5, 2023 in advance of the April 13, 2023 Goal Setting Session. City Manager Walsh stressed that feedback on the Plan today was an important step in the process so that resources necessary to implement the Plan could be identified and included in the FY 2024 Trial Budget.

Mayor Nirenberg commented that the inclusion of public input was critical in development of the

plan and noted that 10 years ago was the last plan created that had a animal no kill goal. Sims agreed that there had been challenges to meeting the no kill goal which included recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic as there were many adoptions when people were quarantined or working from home, but that diminished as people returned to work and school.

Mayor Nirenberg noted that stray animals had been an issue for many years in San Antonio and suggested that there were numerous challenges related to State Law and recommended that Sims provide a clear request for funding from the department so that the goals could be reached. Mayor Nirenberg added that staff health and wellness was also an important goal. Sims stated that there was a long list of needs ranging from staffing to capital projects and equipment, the costs of which needed to be fleshed out over the next few months. City Manager Walsh noted that this was a five-year strategic plan that would require investment over the long term and he committed to coming back during the budget process once policy direction was received.

Mayor Nirenberg closed his comments by stressing that animal care was a policy and resource issue and fully supported the Strategic Plan as it was developed through an extensive community process.

Councilmember Rocha Garcia thanked the ACS Board and the Council District 4 appointee (Chair Braeutigam) for their work. Councilmember Rocha Garcia commented that many residents kept aggressive dogs as protection but also noted that many older residents did not have the funding to fix their fences or that sometimes the dogs jumped over or crawled under the fence. Sims suggested resources to help humanely restrain dogs.

Councilmember Rocha Garcia asked how much of the Plan could be accomplished administratively. Sims stated that most of the Plan required engaged “boots-on-the-ground” work rather than administrative action. Councilmember Rocha Garcia requested clarification on the collaboration with Municipal Court. Judge Carla Obledo reported that they were working toward making the court available for any type of hearing needed as well as magistrates.

Councilmember Rocha Garcia requested a comparison of the ACS Budget against other cities. Sims reported that the budget was similar to large peer cities but our city was rather large geographically. Councilmember Rocha Garcia recommended cross referencing of complaints between ACS, Code Enforcement and SAPD to help problem solve and be more proactive. City Manager Walsh commented that the implementation plan would include resources for other departments as well as ACS.

Councilmember Cabello Havrda recommended a more proactive approach to ACS which included making it a budget priority, better support of rescue partner organizations, veterinary services for local rescue partner organizations, and coordinating with rescues out of the state that were seeking animals. Councilmember Cabello Havrda supported adding mandatory spay/neuter in the State legislative initiative or at least making it more affordable or even free and offering a mobile pet clinic. Councilmember Cabello Havrda suggested direct outreach to all residents and cautioned against relying on electronic means as many people did not have access to computers or internet.

Councilmember Cabello Havrda recommended more focus on rescue and foster programs. She requested metrics and outcome measures for the Plan. Councilmember Cabello Havrda also supported funding to help attract and keep quality employees and ensure that they were provided with mental health services. Councilmember Cabello Havrda supported additional community education in the communities.

Councilmember Bravo commented that the local animal welfare groups were often not happy with ACS and suggested that there needed to be more investment in ACS to meet the goals. Councilmember Bravo noted that in FY 2023 Budget, one additional veterinarian was hired but it still was not enough so he suggested adding another in mid-year. Councilmember Bravo supported spay/neuter programs, placing pets in homes across the city and state, and recommended funding for transportation, marketing, and coordination.

Councilmember Bravo expressed concern that a victim of a dog attack experienced barriers to reporting including language, immigration status, residency, fear of retribution or even simply time. Sims stated that ACS was working with SAPD to train the SAFTE Officers and others on the process and required forms but was hopeful that some of the new State legislation could help relieve the burden on the victim. Assistant City Manager Jeff Coyle stated that the bill filed by Senator Menendez protected the identity of the victim but noted that it was probably as far as the law would go to avoid frivolous anonymous complaints.

Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez recommended the City Council to be aspirational and identify ACS as a priority in case other funds became available even if the budget request was too much for the current or next Fiscal Year. Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez noted that the plan was a result of a Council Consideration Request (CCR) that he and Councilmember Cabello Havrda had authored, therefore, he supported the Plan. Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez noted that 90% of roaming animals had an owner and recommended more funding for spay/neuter surgeries, education, resources to transport animals to homes outside of San Antonio.

Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez supported the five key priorities but still challenged ACS to get to close to a 100% live release rate. Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez also supported resources for partner organizations including rescue and foster agencies.

Councilmember Castillo noted that the ACS Budget had been significantly increased in over 10 years and recommended an increase at mid-year to begin onboarding staff to help alleviate the strain on staff. Councilmember Castillo expressed concern that residents felt unsafe to walk around their neighborhoods due to roaming dogs. City Manager Walsh mentioned the apprenticeship program and advised that ACS could begin sourcing staff and equipment now, without a budget because of the long lead time in getting staff hired and equipment purchased.

Councilmember Castillo suggested distribution of postcards detailing the criminal charges for pet owners who let their dogs roam and potentially bite someone. Councilmember Castillo supported The Good Neighbor Program and the proposed legislation but expressed concern that so much City money was spent on studies and plans for them to be shelved due to lack of funding. She also recommended exploring opportunities for grant funding.

Councilmember Castillo asked how many staff and vehicles were available to pick up stray

animals. Sims reported that there were 28 vehicles with staff and 9 in the council district offices. Councilmember Castillo expressed concern that this was insufficient and supported the Plan and full implementation of the strategies through the budget. City Manager Walsh noted that there were also foundation grants as well as government grants.

Councilmember Viagran lamented that the Brooks spay/neuter clinic was closed last summer due to not having a veterinarian and noted that most of the partners did not serve the south side of San Antonio. She recommended more information on the website to help the community access services. Councilmember Viagran commented that there were 178 authorized positions and yet only three were in the field picking up stray animals.

Councilmember Viagran mentioned that there were over 800 calls to 3-1-1 Customer Service from her council district last month for stray animals and bites but this information was inconsistent with what was being provided by ACS. Councilmember Viagran requested information on the cost of quarantining dogs, court costs or other expenses related to dangerous dogs. Councilmember Viagran expressed concern that certain dog breeds or owners had been vilified.

Councilmember Perry supported the goals of the strategic plan overall but requested more details about implementation to be transparent to the community. Councilmember Perry noted that since FY 2020 the department had added 35 positions and \$5 million but since 2019 the numbers of intake, live release and spay/neuter had declined and recommended changes. Sims replied that the proposed ACS Strategic Plan was intended to change the strategies to become more effective. Oster-Gabrielson explained the breakdown of the live-release rate. Councilmember Perry also requested information on those animals that had to be euthanized.

Councilmember Perry noted that there was \$2.2 million in the 2017 Bond for a stray animal facility as well as \$17 million in the 2022 Bond. Councilmember Perry recommended more metrics and transparency and requested a list of peer cities and some analysis of their strategies to be included in the Plan.

Councilmember Pelaez asked Assistant City Manager Coyle to provide more information on the legislative initiatives. Assistant City Manager Coyle reported that there were proposed bills which would remove legal limitations that prohibited owned animals from being treated by shelter veterinarians. Assistant City Manager Coyle stated that in Texas animals were considered property so mandatory spay/neuter of owned animals would be removing property rights from owners.

Councilmember Pelaez asked Judge Obledo about the requirements and penalties available to Municipal Courts. Judge Obledo stated that if a dog was deemed dangerous, the owner would be required to have homeowners insurance for \$100,000.

Councilmember Pelaez suggested that other community resources such as social workers and schools could be enlisted to help provide resources and education to families and noted that domestic violence included violence against pets.

Councilmember Castro asked if our legislative lobbyists were helping to support the bill being proposed by Senator Menendez. Assistant City Manager Coyle replied that both bills had been

referred to committee and once they were set for hearings, our consultants would engage. Councilmember Castro requested information on how the City would deal with the issues if the bills did not pass. Sims provided some examples of past incidents and Police Chief William McManus added that SAPD would actively assist ACS and make arrests as permitted. Councilmember Castro expressed concern about the fear of retribution. Chief McManus stated that a person could be arrested for retaliation against the victim who reported a dog bite or incident with a dangerous dog. City Manager Walsh added that it was important to talk to the neighbors and coordinate services. Councilmember Castro noted that the 3-1-1 report provided good information and recommended its use in coordinating services.

Councilmember Castro recommended that all educational and outreach efforts should be in English and Spanish. Councilmember Castro also suggested eliminating the sale of animals in favor of directing people interested in owning pets to the shelters. Sims stated that backdoor breeders were marketing on social media and not providing addresses which required ACS to become detectives to find the addresses, however, roadside sellers could be handled differently.

Councilmember Courage mentioned that his dogs were part of his family but expressed concern that significant funding had been allocated to ACS with not enough results. He recommended a review of all costs related to ACS including operational funds, capital funds and services provided by other departments such as SAPD, Municipal Court, 3-1-1, etc.

Councilmember Bravo recommended more investment in ACS to address the needs of the community regardless of peer cities.

Councilmember Rocha Garcia commented that there were 909 calls to 3-1-1 for animal cases in Council District 4 in February 2023 alone and noted that her office offered to submit a report of a dangerous dog to ACS for their residents. She noted that the ACS website allowed 60 days for ACS to respond which might deter residents from reporting stray animals or reporting animal cruelty and required creation of an account and noted that there was not the ability to file a report on the website fully in Spanish.

Councilmember Castillo noted that ACS officers had a unique role because roaming dogs moved around quickly which made it difficult to track them down. Councilmember Castillo requested a briefing at the Public Safety Committee regarding mental health services proposed for ACS employees.

Mayor Nirenberg agreed that data sharing and coordination/collaboration between departments was important but suggested there should be alignment between Bexar County and other local cities related to animal care needs. Sims stated that Bexar County had only four officers for the outlying county.

City Manager Walsh summarized the discussion by noting that staff would prepare for the April 13, 2023 A Session to include what could be accomplished administratively, consideration of potential mid-year adjustments along with associated metrics.

Mayor Nirenberg closed the dialogue by noting that since animals roamed, the City needed a

comprehensive approach with Bexar County to deal not only with strays but also animal sales versus adoptions.

## **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

Mayor Nirenberg recessed the meeting into Executive Session at 4:40 PM to deliberate and discuss the following:

- A. Economic development negotiations pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.087 (economic development).
- B. The purchase, exchange, lease or value of real property pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.072 (real property).
- C. Legal issues related to litigation involving the City pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.071 (consultation with attorney).
- D. Legal issues relating to COVID-19 preparedness pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.071 (consultation with attorney).

Mayor Nirenberg reconvened the meeting in Open Session at 5:07 PM and announced that no official action had been taken in Executive Session.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 5:07 p.m.

**Approved**

**Ron Nirenberg  
Mayor**

**Debbie Racca-Sittre  
City Clerk**