

Communication from Public

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Council File No: 20-1114

Comments for Public Posting: Please see attached my analysis of the report released by Animal Services on January 28, 2021 regarding the long-term plan for the West Valley Animal Shelter. Overall, this report is inadequate, incomplete, contains inaccurate information, makes claims without providing supporting evidence, makes inappropriate comparisons, offers insufficient data to support conclusions, and omits important information. The report fails to demonstrate that Animal Services lacks the staff to operate all 6 shelters, it does not address the Prop F concerns raised by the community, and the data and equity analysis appears to result in erroneous conclusions. Furthermore, the report fails to demonstrate why – or how – West Valley was chosen as a hybrid shelter, how leasing the West Valley Animal Shelter to private organizations addresses the equity concerns raised in the report, or how there will not be a loss in life-saving capacity. Finally, it does not explain how the East Valley Animal Shelter can handle the sheer volume of animals in the Valley without dangerous overcrowding or an increase in the euthanasia rate. I ask that the PAAW Committee and the City Council not take any further action with this report and proceed with making plans to re-open the West Valley Animal Shelter as the municipal shelter it was prior to its closing in April 2020.

Analysis of Animal Services Report for CF 20-1114

By Michelle Cornelius

There are two main arguments presented in the Animal Services report dated January 28, 2021. The first is that Brenda Barnette, the general manager of Animal Services, does not have the staff or budget to operate all 6 City animal shelters and therefore one should be leased to private organizations. The second argument is that based on equity concerns, the West Valley shelter should be the one operated by private organizations. The report does not provide sufficient evidence to support either argument.

Overall, this report is inadequate, incomplete, contains inaccurate information, makes claims without providing supporting evidence, makes inappropriate comparisons, offers insufficient data to support conclusions, and omits important information.

The following analysis is organized by the order in which the information appears in the report.

BACKGROUND

This section of the Animal Services report discusses the reasons behind the decision to close both the West Valley and North Central Animal Shelters last April. It also presents information about budget and staffing, the public/private partnerships Animal Services has regarding operations at the Northeast Valley and Jefferson Park Animal Shelters, and the history of Prop F.

Budget and Staffing

On page 2, GM Barnette presents a table which shows the number of staff allocated for each position, the number of vacancies, the number of employees retiring through the Separation Incentive Program (SIP), and the number of filled positions. The table reveals that only 6 employees who provide direct animal care took the SIP (2 Animal Care Techs and 4 Vet Techs) which is an average loss of one worker per shelter. There are a total of 6 clerks – whose primary job in the shelter is customer service – taking the SIP; this also represents an average loss of one employee per shelter. The department is losing 3 Animal Control Officers (ACOs) and their primary job is enforcement.¹

Ms. Barnette states that because of the vacancies which the department cannot fill,² they do not have enough staff to operate all 6 City shelters “and provide daily care and enrichment for the animals in our shelters and meet the community’s customer service needs.” She then presents a table on page 3 which reflects the ideal number of employees she would like to have working in

¹ The report-back was supposed to include “The roles and duties of the various DAS staff positions that are essential for the re-opening of the West Valley Animal Shelter...” This was not addressed in the report and therefore it is incomplete.

² In a [CAO report](#) dated September 28, 2020 (Council File 20-0600-S72), there is a request from Animal Services to hire 30 ACTs (see page 4). The form asks the requestor to “Provide any additional information that may be helpful to support this new position request,” and the answer provided by Animal Services was “N/A.” Animal Services also requested permission to hire 7 clerks (page 5) and again they answered “N/A” when asked to provide additional information to support the request. This report was issued after the initial proposal to privatize West Valley had been released and community meetings had been held in August 2020; Animal Services did not indicate on the form that if they were unable to hire this additional staff, they would have close a City shelter.

each shelter, not the number of employees who were actually working at each shelter, when they were fully operational, pre-COVID. The latter is the comparison everyone needs to see.

As indicated above, the department is only losing an average of 2 employees per shelter which does not justify closing West Valley as a municipal shelter (the ACOs will have to respond to calls for assistance regardless of where they are stationed, so I did not include them in this calculation).

Regarding enrichment for the animals, that is primarily provided by volunteers and the report does not include anything about the number of volunteers or volunteer hours at each shelter from 2019.

It is important to note that the table on page 3 also shows that GM Barnette created a new position: Animal Care Technician (ACT) Case Manager and assigned one per shelter for a total of 6.³ It is unlikely this person would be assigned to provide daily animal care (much like the Lifesaving Liaisons and Volunteer Liaisons positions are not). Given that her main argument is that she does not have enough staff to provide daily animal care, how does it make sense from an operational standpoint to reassign 6 ACTs to perform other duties?

Ms. Barnette also states that while they were able to avoid layoffs in FY 2020-21, they are being asked for a 3% budget reduction⁴ for FY 2021-22 and 91% of the budget is for salaries. She does not explain how the re-negotiated labor agreement affects the department's ability to meet that obligation, or whether they can simply not fill any of the 34 vacant positions identified in the table on page 2.⁵

What is also not stated here is how recent promotions have impacted the salary costs in the department. Last month, GM Barnette appointed 4 current employees into new positions on an interim, acting, or emergency basis (one interim Assistant General Manager, two acting District Supervisors, and one emergency District Supervisor – they have 5 District Supervisors as of January 31).⁶ Two of the positions – District Supervisor for Lifesaving Shelter Operations and District Supervisor which oversees Grant Funding⁷ – do not appear anywhere on the 2020-2021 organizational chart for Animal Services, so she must have just created them. If 6 shelters were operating without these positions before, the department certainly does not need them now.⁸

³ This position may come with a pay increase as well.

⁴ Total [Adopted Budget](#) for Animal Services in FY 2020-21 was \$23,209,142. A 3% reduction = \$696,274.23.

⁵ On page 2, GM Barnette describes Animal Services as “historically understaffed.” City Council should ask for a report on how many positions have remained vacant during the last 5-10 years, why the positions were not filled, and what the turnover rate is for each positions in the department.

⁶ These come at a time when the unions have agreed to delay cost of living increases which essentially represents a pay cut.

⁷ The City Council recently approved using \$1.5 million in donations from the Animal Welfare Trust Fund to pay an outside company for a new website, marketing, public relations, and fundraising. The fundraising component will cost nearly \$525,000 over 3 years – why aren't they handling grant funding?

⁸ In fact, Ms. Barnette has added several senior leadership positions since she took over the department in 2010. If layoffs ever need to be made, the City should look at the organizational chart from 2009-2010 and identify newly created positions; if the department operated 6 shelters without those positions before, they can do it again.

Public/Private Partnerships

This section is supposed to highlight what Ms. Barnette considers successful examples of public/private partnerships already in place within the City shelter system. She states that the process to award the contract to Best Friends to operate the Northeast Valley shelter in Mission Hills was a very public process. Actually, it was criticized for not being public and several groups were upset that they were not allowed to submit a bid (here is a [link](#) to a public comment from Olivia Barrymore about this issue; it apparently resulted in a loss of funding from a nonprofit for the spay/neuter of New Hope adoptions).⁹

Ms. Barnette states that Best Friends takes in more than the 3,000 animals they are contractually obligated to pull from the City shelters each year. The implication appears to be that this public/private partnership has not adversely impacted life-saving capacity. In an alternate universe where Northeast Valley was still a municipal shelter, presumably it would have impounded half of East Valley's total intake which in 2019 was 14,605 animals. So half of 14,605 equals 7,302. Best Friends pulled a total of 5,059 animals in 2019. Subtracting that number from 7,302 equals 2,243 animals. This number represents the animals who would have entered Northeast Valley but could not, thereby putting an extra burden on capacity at East Valley and likely contributed to that shelter having the highest intake rate and the lowest save rate of any of the 6 City shelters in 2019.¹⁰

One thing Ms. Barnette does not mention in the report is that Best Friends has decreased the number of animals pulled from the City's shelters between 2017 and 2019 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of animals pulled by Best Friends from City shelters

Best Friends	2017	2019	% Diff
Cats	1855	1742	-6%
Kittens	3068	2737	-11%
Dogs	1211	580	-52%

As you can see from the table above, Best Friends can meet their contractual obligation of pulling 3,000 animals per year by just pulling kittens (and kittens are easy to adopt). Best Friends sent out an email last August talking about operational changes coming to the Northeast Valley facility. One of the Animal Services commissioners asked over 4 months ago for Best Friends to update them on their plans but that has not occurred.¹¹

Regarding the Jefferson Park shelter, the City spent \$1.3 million in upgrades to the facility knowing that Animal Services did not have the staff to operate it.¹² When no one submitted a bid to run it, they leased it to Best Friends who operates the shelter like a landlord and allows other rescues to utilize space there.

⁹ More public comments about the contract between Best Friends and Animal Services to operate the Northeast Valley shelter can be found on [council file 11-1345](#).

¹⁰ Statistics from the department can be found [here](#).

¹¹ I emailed 4 commissioners before their Jan. 26 meeting and asked them to follow up but none of them did.

¹² This amount was referenced in a [memo from the CAO](#) on January 31, 2018, Subject: 2017-2018 – Third Construction Projects Report, CAO File No. 0640-01399-0090.

History of Prop F Implementation to build shelters and care facilities

This section of the Animal Services report contains an overview of Prop F, a voter-approved 25-year bond measure passed in 2000, which provided the City with \$154.1 million to build, replace, expand, and renovate the City's animal shelters.¹³ After all construction was completed, the City would operate a total of 8 animal shelters.

The [voter guide for Prop F](#) said: "The new facilities will give animal control officers space to solve problems of stray, abandoned, and dangerous animals." Is this proposal even legal since officers will no longer be able to use the kennel space at West Valley? This question is not answered in the report.

Animal control officers need all the kennel space they have to do enforcement; they never know when they will need the space. An officer investigating a complaint about barking dogs may discover 50 dogs in a residence which need to be impounded for humane reasons and the officer needs the kennel space to hold them as evidence.¹⁴

The voter guide also stated that the City needed to add more animal shelters to improve response times. This proposal actually increases response times because officers will have to transport animals from areas like Woodland Hills and Chatsworth to Van Nuys (which is 45 minutes to 1 hour depending on traffic).

The study from 2000 which is attached to the Animal Services report clearly states that additional staff will need to be hired. In fact, opponents of Prop F asked how the new facilities would be staffed. Once the voters passed Prop F, the mayor and city council had an obligation to the residents to uphold their end of the bargain and budget for an increase in staffing. They have failed residents twice already by allowing Animal Services to lease out two taxpayer funded animal shelters, and now they are entertaining a proposal to betray voters and taxpayers again by doing it with a third shelter.¹⁵

GM Barnette also talks about the General Services Department (GSD) making improvements to West Valley and East Valley but does not include the cost associated with it.¹⁶

There is a table in the report with the number of cages and kennels at all 6 City shelters. Table 2 (next page) shows the total intake numbers in 2019 for East and West Valley combined and the

¹³ Taxpayers are still paying for Prop F.

¹⁴ In the summer of 2019, several small dogs were impounded at West Valley as part of a humane investigation and because the shelter was already over 100% capacity (every cat cage and dog kennel was full, with small dogs housed in temporary cages in the main hallway), these evidence animals were kept in small, temporary folding cages in hallways throughout the nonpublic areas of the shelter.

¹⁵ The implications of this may extend beyond the current situation. If the City asks voters to approve a bond measure in the future, opponents will point to Prop F and argue that city officials cannot be trusted to do what they said they will do with the funds and therefore people should vote no.

¹⁶ The report also boasts about the shelters built with Prop F funds receiving environmental awards while at the same time advocating for a plan in which the residents in the West Valley will have to drive further to receive services and animal control officers will have to drive further to provide them, thereby adding to air pollution.

cage and kennel space at East Valley. How can East Valley accommodate all of these animals without leading to dangerous overcrowding and an increase in the euthanasia rate?¹⁷

Table 2. Animal intake at East and West Valley and Space at East Valley

East and West Valley Intake 2019	Average per month	# of Cages / Kennels at East Valley
10,201 cats and kittens	850	57 cages, 5 community rooms, 4 lobby rolling sets
8,726 dogs	727	162
531 rabbits	44	15
3,548 “other” ¹⁸	296	Information not provided in report

DISCUSSIONS

This section of the Animal Services report contains information about feedback from the community meetings, a data and equity analysis which is supposed to justify the selection of West Valley as the hybrid shelter, and finally the proposal itself.

Feedback from Community Meetings

In this short section, GM Barnette acknowledges they received 460 questions, comments, and suggestions but does not offer any further information about them. Knowing what questions were asked (and how many times it was asked) tells you about the concerns the community had. What were the comments about? Were most of them in opposition to closing West Valley as a municipal shelter? Ms. Barnette states that 11% (about 50) were suggestions which were irrelevant to the budget crisis. Because the suggestions are not included in the report, there is no way to verify whether they were relevant to the budget. I think some of the suggestions were about reduced hours of operation or using volunteers to perform certain tasks. How would those not be relevant?

Data and Equity Analysis

There are several problems with the data presented in this section.¹⁹ Ms. Barnette begins by saying that poverty is forcing people to surrender their pets and Animal Services wants to help underserved communities keep their pets, but she never explains how closing West Valley as a municipal shelter addresses this problem. She goes on to say that budget cuts have negatively impacted critical services but fails to identify what critical services she is talking about, why they are needed, and how leasing West Valley to private organizations addresses that problem.

She then states that “Equity studies like those performed by the Controller agree that the access to critical resources...” but she does not provide any citations for these studies, nor does she state how critical resources are being defined. The “Access to Resources” section of the Controller’s

¹⁷ Prior to the expanded section of West Valley opening in 2007, due to overcrowding about 3-4 large dogs had to be housed together in a single kennel and this sometimes led to dog fights in which dogs were injured or killed.

¹⁸ “Other” includes everything else like wildlife, livestock, guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, reptiles, birds, and fish.

¹⁹ Since Ms. Barnette failed to provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate that she did not have enough staff to operate all 6 shelters, the data and equity argument becomes irrelevant, but it is important to address these claims since they appear in the report.

report looked at access to the internet, health insurance, and high-quality inexpensive food. How does closing West Valley as a municipal shelter address inequity in access to critical resources?

At the bottom of the table on page 7, it says “Note: West Valley has the highest median income and lower percentage of unemployment and poverty level.” Since the table is not organized according to areas served by each of the 6 shelters – but rather by council district – this is not clear at all. Furthermore, the data in the “LAAS Services Center” column does not appear to be correct.²⁰

If you compare two West Valley districts (CD 3 and CD 12) to two West LA districts (CD 5 and CD 11)²¹ using the data in the table, the comparison shows that West LA has a higher median income, lower percentage of population below poverty level, and lower unemployment.

Table 3. Comparison of areas served by West Valley and West LA

District	Median Income	Below Poverty	Unemployment	Animal Shelter
CD 3	\$67,639	14.3%	18.3%	West Valley
CD 12	\$81,750	9.8%	18.4%	West Valley
Average	\$74,694.50	12.05%	18.35%	
CD 5	\$80,723	13.4%	15.9%	West LA
CD 11	\$85,022	9.9%	17%	West LA
Average	\$82,872.50	11.65%	16.45%	

Following GM Barnette’s argument on equity, West LA should have been the shelter chosen to be a hybrid, so the question becomes why it was not. Ms. Barnette said during the community meetings last August that the City had a contract with Beverly Hills to provide animal control services and West LA was the closest shelter to them. This means Animal Services has decided to prioritize services to people who are not residents of LA, who do not have any representation in our City Council, and whose property taxes have not paid for Prop F. I would argue that the City signed a contract with residents of LA to provide services when they asked voters to pass Prop F and the City needs to honor that contract.²²

Proposal

In this section GM Barnette tries to justify why she chose to recommend that West Valley become a hybrid shelter. She writes “We have analyzed each shelter's surrounding residents’ needs by studying Council Districts median income, median education, and median home prices and more.” What is the “and more” part? It is critical to know this information in order to

²⁰ For example, what part of CD 3 is served by West LA? CD 3 covers Canoga Park, Reseda, Tarzana, Winnetka, and Woodland Hills which is served by West Valley. Not sure if any areas of CD 4 are covered by West LA, but since the district consists of Sherman Oaks, Van Nuys, and Toluca Lake that column should include East Valley.

²¹ CD 5 includes Encino which is served by West Valley; the table in the report says CD 5 is only served by West LA.

²² To be clear, I am not advocating that West LA become a hybrid shelter instead of West Valley. The remaining 6 City shelters should continue to serve the public as municipal shelters.

understand the reasoning behind the decision-making process. This report should state exactly what variables were used in the analysis and why they were chosen.

Ms. Barnette also writes: “This recommendation is designed to deliver services to the entire City and to make services easily available where the needs are greatest.” How were “needs” determined? Did they look at the number and types of animals living in the area? The total population served by the shelter? One measure which can be used to identify needs is the total number of animals impounded: in 2019 West Valley was the 3rd highest in the City with 9,320 animals. By contrast, West LA had the lowest intake with 4,781 animals impounded.

Then there are problems with the plan itself.²³ Allowing ACOs to work out of West Valley does not help response times if they must drive all the animals they impound over to East Valley. There will only be 28 temporary holding cages in receiving and ACO holding available to do intake for sick or injured animals. Since there will not be any medical staff on site, sick or injured animals have to wait until a City employee is available to either drive them to another City shelter or to a private vet.

She states that the City will manage the “stalls behind the shelter” but this area is only for large animals like horses. Where will the small livestock – like goats and pigs – go? West Valley also has an aviary, a place for turtles, and a reptile room. Does East Valley have that as well?

Ms. Barnette then claims that there will not be a reduction in life-saving space because the rescues operating out of West Valley will pull animals from other City shelters. How many animals will they have to pull each month, especially from East Valley which is already overwhelmed because it covers the area which was supposed to be served by the Northeast Valley shelter? Anything less than the average intake of West Valley, which was 776 animals per month in 2019, is by definition a reduction in capacity.

GM Barnette writes that not impounding lost animals at West Valley is part of the department’s reduction in services which will result in cost savings, but she does not say how much money will be saved, when those cost savings will be realized, and how it addresses the City’s current budget crisis. In her initial proposal dated June 26, 2020, she wrote that “Cost savings will be realized through attrition associated with retirements, transfers, and resignations and the Department’s inability to backfill vacancies caused by these occurrences.” She also acknowledges in the initial proposal that “Savings generated by transitioning WV [West Valley] to a Community Resource Center will not occur immediately but over time through attrition.” Judging by her own comments in the first proposal, this plan will not address current problems with the City’s budget.

Ms. Barnette goes on to say: “PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, it is well documented that dogs and cats who get out of the house or yard will get home much more quickly (usually 24-30 hours) if neighbors help neighbors. When a well-intentioned person picks up a lost pet and drives it to a shelter, it delays the owner locating the pet and, on occasion, we adopt the pet out before the owner even finds the pet in one of our shelters.” There are several problems with this claim.

²³ I am addressing these issues because they appear in the report. I do not think that attempting to fix these problems will make this proposal acceptable and West Valley needs to be re-opened as a municipal shelter.

First, where are the citations with supporting evidence?²⁴ (“Well documented” implies several studies found the same results.) Second, she seems to be pushing her “[Shelter-at-Home](#)” program which allows people who find a lost pet to keep it and try to find the owner themselves (the department is supposed to be keeping records on these lost pets, so they should be able to provide a report on its effectiveness). The suggestion here seems to be that people should not worry about lost pets being reunited with their owners because “neighbors will help neighbors.” If that’s the case, then there would be fewer animals coming into the shelter resulting in a lower shelter population. As a result, fewer employees would be needed to care for them making the loss of 6 employees who provide direct animal care to the SIP even less problematic.

Third, how does bringing the animal to the shelter delay the owner locating their lost pet? If there is a tag, license, or microchip, the staff attempts to contact the owner immediately.²⁵ Fourth, she states that “on occasion” an animal is adopted out before it is reunited with its owner. This is not an argument for keeping lost pets out of animal shelters or for closing a municipal shelter; rather it is an argument for educating the public on the importance of microchipping their pets (which can be done at City shelters). While it is generally desirable to keep animals out of shelters, there are some good public health and safety reasons to take in lost pets.²⁶

Towards the end, Ms. Barnette writes, “Our proposal is an effort to distribute resources equitably amongst our constituents. We are trying to get the services closest to the communities where transportation challenges prohibit access to services.” How exactly are resources being distributed equitably among the residents of LA? The San Fernando Valley constitutes about 40% of the City’s population but she is proposing that it will only be served by one animal shelter. Furthermore, if someone without a car finds a lost pet or needs to owner surrender their animal, they need an animal control officer to pick it up (something that is currently not happening because of COVID). How does closing West Valley as a municipal shelter address transportation challenges people have in accessing services?

In the last paragraph GM Barnette writes, “In general, if approved, West Valley Services will house the services in our other shelters except for taking in lost pets.” This sentence is confusing. Presumably, she means that people in the West Valley can get services at other City

²⁴ Ms. Barnette has been known to reference a study by the ASPCA on finding pets which had some methodological problems, not the least of which was that it did not specify if people used different methods to find their lost pets depending on if they lived in rural, suburban, or urban areas, so generalizing any of the findings to Los Angeles is inappropriate. Furthermore, the purpose of the ASPCA study was to provide information to veterinarians and animal welfare workers on methods used to find lost pets so they could better assist other people in finding their lost pet; at no point do the authors suggest that people not bring lost pets to the shelter.

²⁵ The staff will call if the animal comes in during a reasonable hour; they might not call if it is 2am.

²⁶ All animals who come into the shelter receive a medical exam which can serve as a screening tool for identifying medical problems and cases of animal abuse or neglect. When a lost pet is redeemed by the owner, if it is not already fixed then it will be sent for surgery (unless the owner pays for a breeder’s license). This provides the department with an opportunity to enforce the spay neuter law which helps with the City’s pet overpopulation problem. Dogs will also receive a license which is not just a fee to be collected, it is how the department verifies dogs are vaccinated against rabies making it a public health issue. If the animal is not microchipped, it will receive one. If an animal gets impounded multiple times, an ACO will do a property inspection to determine why the animal keeps escaping (loose animals can be a threat to public safety not just in terms of things like dog bites but also people swerving to avoid hitting them on the street.)

shelters. If so, she should be detailing exactly what services residents will no longer receive at the West Valley Animal Shelter so that everyone understands what is being lost. She ends the report by saying that this model works very well at Jefferson Park but fails to provide any evidence to support this claim.

MY CONCLUSION

This report is poorly written and incoherent.²⁷ It fails to demonstrate that Animal Services lacks the staff to operate all 6 shelters, it does not address the Prop F concerns expressed by the community, and the data and equity analysis appears to result in erroneous conclusions. Furthermore, the report fails to demonstrate why – or how – West Valley was chosen as a hybrid shelter, how leasing the West Valley Animal Shelter to private organizations addresses the equity concerns raised in the report, or how there will not be a loss in life-saving capacity. Finally, it does not explain how the East Valley Animal Shelter can handle the sheer volume of animals in the Valley without dangerous overcrowding or an increase in the euthanasia rate.

In the neighborhood council meetings I have attended over the past 6 months, several people spoke of the West Valley Animal Shelter as a source of pride in their community; it is a source of pride because we know it provides the last safety net for lost, homeless, sick, abused, and neglected animals and that is why voters agreed to the bond measure to pay for it. This shelter has been a part of the community for nearly 50 years, and over that time the shelter has received an outpouring of support through donations of food, toys, blankets, and dog beds.

This support is also evidenced by the fact that 11 neighborhood councils in the San Fernando Valley have filed Community Impact Statements (CIS) in [council file 20-1114](#) supporting re-opening West Valley as a fully functioning municipal animal shelter, and other neighborhood councils are considering filing a CIS as well.²⁸

I ask that the PAAW Committee and the City Council not take any further action with this report and proceed with making plans to re-open the West Valley Animal Shelter as the municipal shelter it was prior to its closing in April 2020.

Michelle Cornelius
West Valley volunteer since 2007

²⁷ This is particularly unacceptable given this report came from a well-compensated department manager. According to Transparent California, [Brenda Barnette's total pay and benefits in 2019](#) was \$324,066.52.

²⁸ The 11 neighborhood councils who have filed a CIS are Northridge East, Porter Ranch, Tarzana, Sherman Oaks, Northridge South, Lake Balboa, Encino, Sunland-Tujunga, West Hills, Reseda, and Canoga Park.