

Consolidated St. Louis County animal shelter will end space woes

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OLIVETTE — St. Louis County's new animal shelter, which is expected to open next fall, is about "space, space, space," says Dr. Dolores Gunn, director of the county's health department.

Lack of space is the problem at the county's two current shelters, at 4100 Seven Hills Drive in north St. Louis County, and 77 Hunter Avenue in Ladue.

They have failed numerous state inspections, mainly because their cages are too small for large dogs. Other problems include a lack of air conditioning and floors that might harbor disease-causing bacteria.

The new facility, at 10521 Baur Boulevard in Olivette, will have almost 26,000 square feet, about double the space in the two existing shelters combined.

It will have a large area for animal adoptions, more space for animal surgeries, more separation between aggressive and calm dogs, a dog run, adequate storage space and a lunchroom that the staff will no longer share with captured reptiles.

St. Louis County Executive Charlie Dooley included \$5.8 million in this year's budget for furnishing and converting the new building.

It will also be the headquarters for the county's vector control program, which mainly works to eradicate mosquitoes. It's now at the Hunter Avenue site.

In 2008, the county bought the Baur structure, a former interior design store and warehouse, for \$1.6 million. It sits on 1.55 acres and has 54 parking spaces.

The new shelter will handle up to 480 animals at a time. The surgery area will include lighting comparable to that in hospital surgical rooms.

The consolidated shelter will be accessible to people from the entire county, Gunn said. It is not far from Highway 40 and Interstates 70 and 170.

The county police's 2nd Precinct station, across the intersection of Baur and Ashby roads, will serve as a landmark that can help people find the animal shelter, she said.

The county currently handles about 8,000 animals a year. It has 89 cages and 14 animal pens at Seven Hills, and 53 cages and 10 pens at Hunter Avenue.

"This is good news for the animals who will now be sheltered in an updated facility," Jeane Jae, spokeswoman for the Humane Society of Missouri, said in a statement. "We also hope this new facility will help reduce the number of unwanted pets by making it easier for people to reclaim lost pets and encouraging more people to choose shelter adoption."

The county is responsible for enforcing the county's animal-control ordinances and for pickup of abandoned animals. The society offers adoptions at four area locations. It does not see the county facility as competition regarding adoptions.

"There are more than enough animals to go around," Jae said.

Matt Rold, a program coordinator for enforcement of state animal-care regulations, said the current shelters don't meet Missouri's minimum standards.

The most common problem inspectors found between 2002 and this year were that cages were too small, particularly for big dogs.

In a report last August about the Seven Hills shelter, state inspector Olivia Bennett said: "There were numerous dogs housed in the stainless steel cages that did not have the six inches of clearance space required from their heads to the top of the kennel."

Her report said the staff was doing the best it could. "Unfortunately, the size of animals is larger than the size of pen space available," the report said.

Inspectors at the Hunter Avenue shelter were concerned last February about ventilation. In addition, inspectors noted that concrete floors with worn-out sealant could harbor animal disease bacteria.

The state rarely closes a government animal control shelter or fines operators. "There would be no place to go for the dogs," Rold said.

The county built the Hunter Avenue shelter in 1967 on an old landfill. The Seven Hills shelter opened in 1975 in a building that had housed an automobile service garage.

On a recent tour of the shelters, a Post-Dispatch reporter found the pens —

each 17 by 8 feet — relatively empty, with no more than five dogs in a pen in Seven Hills and four on Hunter Avenue. Cats seemed to heavily outnumber dogs.

In a busy spring or summer, the pens could contain as many as 14 dogs.

Both buildings were clean and largely odor free. Gunn said the staff constantly washes the floors in animal areas.

A design company, Engine House #1 Inc. of St. Louis, has completed a design of the interior of the new shelter. The county will seek construction bids soon from contractors.