

Pet Adoption Center Saves the Beautiful, the Wretched

by Gerald Scott
Photos by Bill Springer

The last thing Lawrence Obrecht wanted, was for a newspaper to come crashing in on him last Wednesday.

We didn't know, but the dog pound deals with more political garbage than one might realize. Obrecht was not having a good day when we barged in.

The reason behind our visit to the Oakland County Animal Control facility in Auburn Hills, however, was only to find out what connection they might have with the business community.

Would the people working in the local business community be interested in adopting some pets, right here? After all, the dog pound is right here in Auburn Hills. How convenient.

And, what about drumming up some support within the business community on behalf of the facility? Oh, and how about some new volunteers?

Everyone in the room sat their wild-eyed. They had thought we were from PETA. The subject changed to everything else, to where we were from, and our gilded pasts. After about half-an-hour, the people from the animal rescue center pulled themselves back together, and we had a pretty nice chat, about many possibilities, including the facility's mission and history.

Division Manager Obrecht was pretty blunt in his discussion of the Animal Control Division, its facility at 1700 Brown Road, just south of the GM Orion Assembly plant, actually, and much more.

"The shelter was built in 1974, it was a wreck. It was the Humane Society that built it using Lawrence Tech student engineers. I'm not sure when the county took it over (probably 1985) and the Humane Society moved to Rochester Hills," Obrecht said.

"It was in the 1980s sometime that the county took it over. It's been here since whenever they did that.

"The functions are different – they are a 501 (charity).

"We operate and are controlled by state law. We do not do any local ordinances and this county does not have an animal ordinance.

"The Humane Society (more or less) wants to save all the animals and they're having a real tough time doing that, I'm sure you're aware of that.

"Our mission – we're really health officials. We are charged by the state through the Health Department to do rabies control, that's what the state says we're all about.

"Many, many years ago, the state said you have to license your dog (any dog owner). And in order to license your dog, you have to have an up-to-date rabies shot."

But for having said all of that, the Oakland County Animal Control Division, through its Oakland Pet Adoption Center, offers way more public services than one might first think.

Among the Pet Center's services and offerings are the following activities:

- Dog tags;
- Children's Village;
- Pets for seniors;
- Spay/neuter clinics;
- Dog vaccine clinics;
- Volunteer training orientation;
- Volunteer specialty training (including vaccine & spay/neuter



Wilma, a Husky-Shepherd mix, was taken into the shelter in June.



Deputy Mary Staple with Rosie, a very loving German Short Hair.

clinics, special events, adoption events, etc.)

- Educational program for local schools;
- Legacy Fund to help injured and sick animals that come into the shelter;
- Haven program;
- Foster program;
- Hosting various events for the community including Day with Santa, Howl-o-Ween, etc.)
- Greeting card program;
- Satellite adoption centers.

That ambitious set of offerings explains why the Division has as many as 70 employees, most part-time with about 20 full-time.

Obrecht continued discussing his Division's mission and services provided:

"We run a rabies clinic, we are not an open-to-the-public clinic, the Humane Society has a fee-for-service clinic. We have a clinic here for our own animals," Obrecht said.

"What is the charge (mission)? The charge is rabies control.

"Through the years, that has spun off into many, many other kinds of functions.

"Such as, there's no mandate to run an (animal) adoption center, to have a kennel and adopt animals out – but, of course, we do it. Functions, programs and events that we do to get as many animals adopted as we can.

"In addition to that, we are required by state law to have an animal control officer. Doesn't say we have to have one per 100,000 people . . . the county itself could have one and be compliant.

"We have nine full-time, six part-time, on the road, doing stray animals, animal abuse, bites – we do bites because that ties back into rabies . . . and a multitude of other things we do in the community."

Meanwhile, common animal-related events like dead deer in the roadway are not part of the Division's function.



Lawrence (Larry) Obrecht, manager of the Oakland County Animal Control Division.

"You couldn't call here and say there's a dead deer, pick it up (instead, that's the DNR's purview)," Obrecht said.

Obrecht's been there for nine years himself now, and perhaps what's changed the most for him as a manager is that his Division is being asked to take on a larger and larger share of the county's geography to patrol or be responsible for in terms of Animal Control Officers' road routes and such.

"We are now covering more of the county than we ever did before, we did about 75 percent of the geography and we did about 50 percent of the population because southeast (Oakland County) is where the population really is," Obrecht said.

"Since that time, we've picked up Pontiac, 60,000 people, Troy, 82,000 people, Hazel Park, Clawson, we're getting Madison Heights, we do Royal Oak Township, so now we do about 75 percent of the population of the

county. What we will be picking up this year will be Royal Oak and Berkley. Southfield, I'm not sure because Southfield passed a three-year budget that's okay for awhile (providing its own animal services internally)."

"We're no different than, say, the Clerk, or any other department of the county. Our deputies are deputized by the sheriff, they carry weapons, they write tickets, they have to qualify monthly the same as a regular deputy and so we are part of the county," Obrecht said.

"The difference is my people, officers, do not report to the sheriff, but they report through me, through the (Oakland County) administration.

"We do quarantine, we do bites, we do abuse. We have a jail here. We have an area where dogs are kept for rabies observation, court determination, then they'll probably be put to sleep.

"We have 20 full-time workers

now, there were 25 when I came, through the budget crunch we were down to 13 but now we're back up to 20.

"We have 12 prisoners, 7 days a week, every day, who do our cleaning. We have 20 census workers that are summer help, we have 19 PTNE (part-time non-eligible) employees, not eligible for benefits and limited to 1,000 hours of service per calendar year."

Some of the services they provide often include something one might not expect, such as safely handling exotic animals when their Oakland County owners die or become part of court cases involving animal disposition.

Besides adopting the available dogs and cats, the public can support the Division by serving as volunteers, whether as a corporation, group or individuals.

Volunteers continue to play a huge role in ensuring that everything runs smoothly at Oakland County Animal Control.