ANIMAL SERVICES ADVISORY BOARD
REGULAR MEETING
COUNTY ADMINISTRATION BUILDING, 5TH FLOOR MANATEE ROOM
1112 Manatee Avenue West
Bradenton, Florida
SEPTEMBER 9, 2026

Present were:
Dena Sabou, Chairperson
Kim Bruenner
David Daniels
Wendy Gonzales
Kerri Hughes
Ly Bibiana Salmon Wetzel
Carol Whitmore

Two seats are vacant.

Absent were:
Melissa Carman
Katy Demick, Vice-Chairperson

Also present were:
Melissa Bomar, Children's Services Section Manager
Ellie Levine, Volunteer Coordinator
George Kruse, Board of County Commissioner
Dr. Syna Johnson, Chief Veterinarian Shelter Operations
Michael Strollo, Communications Coordinator
Vicki Tessmer, Board Records Supervisor, Clerk of the Circuit Court
Caitlin Dixon, Board Records Clerk, Clerk of the Circuit Court

1. Chairperson Sabou called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.

AGENDA/SIGN-IN SHEET

2. **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Chairperson Sabou led the Pledge of Allegiance.

3. **ROLL CALL**

A quorum was declared with Members Carman and Demick absent.

4. **APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES**

A motion was made by Member Whitmore, seconded by Member Gonzales, and carried 7-0, with Members Carman and Demick absent, to approve the minutes of August 12, 2026.

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5. **DISCONTINUE FREE OUT OF COUNTY ADOPTION EVENTS**

Member Daniels discussed significant risks related to County dogs being sent to out-of-county adoption events, free adoption versus responsible pet ownership, dog fighting, threat of "bait dogs", loss of jurisdictional oversight when dogs are sent out of County, no negative fiscal impact of discontinuing events, and documented cases of dog fighting.

Kate MacFall, Florida State Director for Humane Society of the United States, agreed dog fighting is a major issue in every county, the importance of having conversations with adopters, reduced fees are not a major concern in animal sheltering, fee waivers are intended to encourage people to adopt animals, reduced fees are standard, not in a position to resist such efforts, and reduced fees can create positive outcomes.

Michael Strollo, Communications Coordinator, informed members that this initiative was part of a County campaign on social media in partnership with Clear the Shelters, and there are eight cited academic articles addressing waiving adoption fees.

Discussion ensued regarding adoption events being helpful for animals to find homes, misconceptions surrounding free adoption events, requiring identification for adopters, dog fighting in every county, retention and outcomes for out-of-county adoption events, dogs being microchipped, not ideal to give dogs away at no cost, staff handles and reviews adoption applications, appropriate locations for adoption events, have adoption events in each district, individuals working on behalf of dog fighters may come to fee adoption events, verifying permanent addresses of adopters, and conditions in homes may be worse than those in a shelter.

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6. **MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR**

Chairperson Sabou addressed feedback regarding concerns with high expectations regarding the purpose of the Board, monthly meetings were requested, misinformation being shared on social media, maintaining a solution-based approach, recommendations should be based on facts, the role of the Advisory Boards is to be the voice for the animals, and it is essential for Members to work together to make a difference.

Discussion ensued regarding passion surrounding animal welfare, making recommendations on behalf of public concerns, respecting differing opinions, agenda item selection process, discussion topics include potential solutions and specific goals, approval process for placing items on the Board of County Commissioners agenda, purposeful recommendations, identifying priorities, and focus on improvements to existing shelters.

George Kruse, County Commissioner, provided an overview of how advisory boards make recommendations to the County Commission, operation of other advisory boards, and the importance of staff presentations in conjunction with topics under discussion.

Discussion continued regarding the overpopulation of stray cats in the County.

7. **JAIL KENNEL VISIT REVIEW**

Chairperson Sabou visited the County Jail Kennel. The dogs are being well cared for, receive daily training, progress logs are maintained for each dog, the kennel is organized and clean, 16-foot kennel runs, dogs serve as emotional support for inmates, and the positive outcomes for dogs and inmates as a result of this program.

Discussion ensued regarding the end goal for the dogs at the jail kennel.

Mr. Strollo mentioned he has been working closely with Manatee County Sheriff's Public Information staff to promote this project.

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8. **MCAW OVERVIEW**

Dr. Syna Johnson, Chief Veterinarian Shelter Operations, utilized a slide presentation to review Manatee County Animal Welfares (MCAW) mission and roles, overview of the shelter system, MCAW is the only open-admission shelter in the County, data from the last 10 years regarding intake versus adoptions, transfers and return to owner (RTO), save rate, comparison of shelters in the Tampa Bay region, overview of field operations, field operations responded to 10,000 plus cases in the previous year, cruelty cases involving emaciation and severe neglect, 2025 hoarding case, operations at Bishop Animal Shelter, impound and medical services including specialty surgeries, routine veterinary care, blood transfusions, diagnostic services and dental procedures, Friends of Manatee County Animal Welfare (FOMCAW), programs and funding that help support MCAW, 1,171 year to date (YTD) adoptions, staff daily responsibilities, overview of Cat Town, dog adoptions, working cat program for non-traditional cats, the Petco partnership, behavior/ enrichment program, benefits of Doggy Day Out and playgroups, community outreach and education events, foster program, volunteer program, services offered through the Resource Center, vaccination clinics/Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) clinics, Manatee County jail kennel program, and MCAW 2025 snapshot of intake and the outcomes.

Dr. Johnson continued the presentation by highlighting MCAW's shelter wish list, including expanding the community resource center, adding staffing for the behavior team, permanent shade structures, increased adoptable space for cats, increasing requirements for spay and neuter, first time microchipping, and eliminating stray wait for neonates. Some initiatives would require ordinances and legal changes.

Discussion ensued regarding the need for tracking surrenders, heartworm medication being public responsibility, potential use of heartworm funds for other purposes, restrictive funds are set by donors, FOMCAW gets designated grants, lack of staff to track surrenders, open intake shelters have different obligations, not accepting owner surrenders leading to more strays, timeline for lifting parvo restrictions, parvo being prevalent in Florida, date intake for 2026, specialty surgeries paid with Animal Service's budget, increasing fines for non-spayed or neutered animals, second offender law, ordinance changes require legal review and Board approval, have mandatory microchipping for stray animals, volunteer growth, and concerns regarding timely onboarding for volunteers.

Ellie Levin, Volunteer Coordinator, explained that the majority of volunteers get approved in the same week. Volunteers who are not approved may not have completed the required steps, and follow-ups are conducted with volunteers.

Dr. .Johnson shared there is a new a new Human Resource (HR) volunteer representative who has helped expedite the onboarding of new volunteers.

Discussion continued regarding expenses for tents and fans being paid from the Animal Service's budget, using reserve funds, and drainage issues are being fixed.

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9. **SHELTER WHITEBOARDS COLOR CODING PROPOSAL**

Member Bruenner presented a handout outlining current challenges with tracking walk times for dogs and remembering where every dog belongs. Larger whiteboards and color-coded cabins could make it easier for staff and volunteers to identify which dogs need a break.

Discussion ensued regarding staff only putting their initials and not the time they took the dogs out.

Ms. Levine noted staff typically records only their initials for the dogs' first outing of the day, as staff takes all the dogs out when they arrive, and thinner markers can be provided for the whiteboards.

Discussion continued regarding needing property management approval to install larger white boards.

Member Bruenner continued the slides stating larger whiteboards and tracking with time and initials will help reduce stress on the dogs, especially ones that need a break, recording both time and staff/ volunteer initials is critical when multiple people are working together, and colored cabins would help with memory.

Mr. Strollo explained the cabins are identified by letter for fire safety purposes.

Ms. Levine mentioned she updates the list of where the dogs are located once a week, and it is posted in the volunteer cabin. AS20260909DOC006

10. **STAFFING SUPPORT TO RESTORE CANINE PLAYGROUPS**

Member Huges voiced concerns regarding additional staffing is needed to safely facilitate shelter playgroups. Playgrounds will provide dogs with exercise, enrichment, and socialization, and provide staff insight into individual dog's behavior.

Dr. Johnson mentioned in order to bring this proposal before the Board, the amount of staff needed and associated staffing costs would need to be determined, and waiting for the University of Florida (UF) report would be beneficial.

Chairperson Sabou suggested discussing this item further at next meeting.

Dr. Johnson mentioned if additional staff are approved, staff could rotate responsibilities and perform different duties throughout the day. AS20260909DOC007

11. **COMMISSIONER UPDATES**

There were no Commissioner comments or updates.

12. **NEW/ OLD BUSINESS**

Chairperson Sabou reminded members that she will be presenting to the Board of County Commissioners on October 6, 2026.

Discussion ensued regarding retaining the Lena Road Property, factual information is needed to support the request to the Board, increasing the internal kennels by removing the partitions, and establishing an overflow area for the dogs.

Dr. Johnson advised that even with the removal of the dividers, there would still be a capacity issue.

Discussion continued regarding the need to be informed of the County's plans for replacing the prefabricated kennels, and requesting status updates on replacement plans.

Chairperson Sabou noted Item 10 will be revisited and discussed once the UF report is received.

13. **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Julie Madison thanked the members for their time and hard work and proposed staffing solutions.

Susan Parker presented her own breakdown of the staffing budget.

Cathy Bridwell expressed concerns with employee retention.

Martha Jacobs commented on the growth of this Advisory Board and the Board of County Commissioners needing to support ASAB.

Victoria Rubietta addressed concerns regarding if parvo will still be present in the grass and yards, and the capacity of the kennels.

There being no further public comment, Chairperson Sabou closed public comment.

Discussion ensued regarding cleaning solution for parvo is working very well, backup generators, working AC and heat in the kennels, capacity of 120 dogs, intake is similar to other municipal shelters, and the live-release rate.

Mr. Strollo announced a partnership with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) for a peanut butter drive and there's a new episode of "PAWS" on the County's Facebook page.

(Depart Member Whitmore)

14. **NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will take place October 14, 2026, 1:00 p.m., in the Manatee County Administrative Building, 1112 Manatee Avenue W, Bradenton, in the 5th Floor Manatee Room.

ADJOURN

There being no further business, Chairperson Sabou adjourned the meeting at 3:57p.m.

Minutes Approved: October 14, 2026