

Voters to decide on animal control

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Burke County residents can now be the voice for the voiceless - if they want to be.

As the implementation of animal control has remained a highly debated issue for more than a year, both the Democratic and Republican parties want to know what taxpayers think.

Come the July 15 primary, both parties will have the opportunity to say whether they are for or against the county constructing and operating an animal shelter and providing animal control officers.

This question being added to the ballot comes at a crucial time - the county has recently fallen under fire for allegedly disregarding the need for animal control. Emails from across the country have been flooding the inboxes of the county administrator and commissioners, some offering constructive criticism while others contain insults, profanity and threats.

While one email refers to commissioners as "lazy bums" who should help the animals in "(this) totally God-forsaken county," the name-calling isn't just directed at the commission. Another goes on to say that Georgians are "a bunch of backwood hicks" who are a disgrace to the rest of the country.

The email crusade appears to have been initiated by an

Aiken woman who's been pushing for animal control in Burke County for quite some time. Lisa Williams' initial email included photos of dogs she says were rescued in Burke County. Though she maintains her only agenda is to help the animals, some people have expressed suspicion that her intentions are to obtain monetary gain through her low cost spay and neuter clinic.

Reports filed at the Burke County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) over the last several months do prove instances of cruelty, abuse and attacks on other animals as well as people, but they also show those who are pointing the finger may be part of the problem as well.

Burke County resident Samantha Holton, who has been trying to establish a low cost clinic here, has herself been accused of having a vicious dog. According to a report filed at the BCSO, the woman's dog allegedly attempted to bite the 9-year-old granddaughter of a Girard woman, who also told officers that the dog had tried to bite a number of people in the area - while its owner watched.

Williams has on more than one occasion filed a report of spotting malnourished or neglected dogs, and, in some instances, officers declared the reports untrue and referred to her as threatening. She submitted a petition requesting animal control to the commission last April. Some Burke Countians' names were on the more than 1,400 signature list, but many were from other states and countries as far away as Hungary.

As far as the emails are concerned, county administrator Merv Waldrop isn't taking the threats or insults to heart.

"(The email senders) have not been very thorough in getting their facts straight about the things that are easily verified," he said, adding that he doubts other things they write. "If they exaggerate items that don't benefit their cause, it appears that the truth has no bearing on what they will say ... I tend to discount the opinions, even more so as ninety-nine percent have come from out of the county."

Waldrop went on to say that even though they have the

liberty to say these mean or untrue things, "it is not helping their cause and is turning sentiment against them from those who otherwise might be sympathetic."

And those who've shown sympathy include the public officials being slandered in the mass email distributions.

Burke County commissioner Wayne Crockett requested that two men who stole tractors from his local business pay \$5,000 to the Old Fella Burke County Animal Rescue, and commissioner Henry Tinley as well as Sheriff Greg Coursey have also made contributions to help in the organization's mission.

Although commissioners voted against animal control more than a year ago, Waldrop said if the ballots indicate that Burke County citizens want it, the commission will face a great deal of pressure to raise taxes to fund it.

"Nothing would immediately happen," he said, "as this is a nonbinding referendum."

Waldrop hopes the results from the primary will help the commission gain a greater understanding as to what constituents want. While some want the county to operate a shelter and some want the county to run a spay and neuter program, others want a county leash-law or an ordinance forbidding dogs from being chained.

"This is Burke County's opportunity to speak up," Waldrop said, "and the commissioners will get a chance to hear what the taxpaying citizens want."

DID YOU KNOW?

- The City of Waynesboro Animal Control recently joined other animal welfare organizations in the area that list pets on petfinder.com. The Web site has more than 250,000 homeless pets listed. View Waynesboro area pets at www.petfinder.com/shelters/GA532.html.
- Old Fella Burke County Animal Rescue continues to educate the community on responsible pet ownership and the importance of having pets spayed or neutered. The group started its own spay and neuter program,

and members take several trips throughout the year to transport dogs to adoption facilities across the country.