

Obtaining and providing funding for worthwhile urban animal management projects

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INTRODUCTION

This paper has been prepared as an explanatory tool for Animal Control Officers and Managers wishing to obtain Council support for the provision of urban animal management officers and related functions. The content of this paper is based on an approach undertaken by the author, at Bayside City Council, as a method of identifying resident satisfaction with existing arrangements and identifying a strategy for future development whilst obtaining both financial and moral support from Council. In order to understand the issues facing Bayside City Council and its' officers you must first gain an understanding of the social and legislative changes that had recently taken place in Victoria which impacted on the field of animal management.

BACKGROUND

Traditionally the role of a Local Government Animal Control Officer in its simplest form prominently consisted of the following functions:

- the impounding, caring, releasing and euthanasing of stray and/or unidentified animals;
- conduct and maintain Council's annual dog registration program;
- the investigation of dog attacks; and
- the issuing of infringement notices and/or prosecution of breaches of the Act or laws pertaining to animals.

However, as a result of urban development and growing unemployment society's fabric has changed as have the response to issues involving animals by Council and its officers. In Victoria in the late 80s and early 90s, particularly within the Melbourne suburbs, there was a political decision to curtail what was termed the urban sprawl by encouraging better use of existing land and resources via the growth of multi unit developments. This principle has resulted in condensed living, whereby people have less land within their own property envelope and therefore the use of public open space generally has increased.

This, combined with the increased cost of living, growing unemployment and job uncertainty, has resulted in the necessity for double income families, a faster lifestyle and less time. This change in social fabric has lead to:

- increased pressure on the individual;
- people generally becoming less tolerant;
- people becoming better educated as to their rights; and
- government being asked to regulate on more issues.

Whilst it is arguable whether the above summary on why society has changed is correct, the fact remains that as a society we are tending to be less tolerant of others, better advised of our rights and are requiring our legislators and enforcement officers to become involved in more issues. This was clearly demonstrated in Victoria with the introduction of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994 which dramatically increased the role of local government and its' officers in the area of urban animal management to include:

- the impounding, caring, releasing and euthanasing of stray and/or unidentified animals;
- registrations of dogs and cats;
- investigations of dog attacks;
- investigation of animal nuisance complaints;
- issuing of infringements and the prosecution of offences;

- the declaration of dangerous dogs
- investigation of animal cruelty issues;
- regulating the number of animals kept;
- defining the method of restraint and locations where and when specific animals are prohibited in public places;
- inspection of public educators;
- registration of animal businesses (shops, shelters and boarding kennels); and
- inspection of animal businesses.

This increase in responsibilities provided a challenge for Bayside City Council, which had only been formed in December 1994 as part of the local government reform and amalgamation. Bayside as a municipality, is an inner Melbourne suburb approximately 15 kilometres from the Melbourne GPO and comprises the former cities of Brighton, Sandringham and parts of the former cities of Moorabbin and Mordialloc. Additionally, the municipality is bounded by Port Phillip Bay, predominantly residential and comprises approximately 47,000 rateable properties with 90,000 residents.

Whilst geographically the former municipalities were similar they had very different operational approaches in the field of urban animal management and enforcement practices. Upon Bayside's formation the elected councillors were replaced initially by State Government appointed Commissioners who together with Council's administration were charged with developing and implementing the laws for Bayside including those pertaining to animal management together with service standards.

During this period Council made several decisions concerning the laws pertaining to Bayside and resolved amongst other things to make it mandatory for all dogs to be leashed on public land including the streets and parks unless the park was designated as an off leash area. The introduction and implementation of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994 and in particular the Leash Law Requirements resulted in the formation of several lobby groups opposing the changes and with the reinstatement of elected Councillors they sought to have the laws reviewed and possibly overturned.

STRATEGY

In the past like most Councils, Bayside City Council and its Officers often found themselves in an unpalatable position of "dammed if you do and dammed if you don't" when trying to deal with the issue of urban animal management. As I am sure most councils have experienced, if they actively enforce the laws pertaining to animals they were often criticised for being too hard and if they took a more lenient approach they were criticised for being too lenient and failing to meet their statutory obligations.

As a result of the increased pressure and confusion regarding the level of service and types of restrictions the Bayside community desired and considered appropriate, the following strategy was developed to bring about an understanding of:

- what services Council was currently providing and why;
- what legislative and local restrictions were currently in place;
- how do we gauge/gain an understanding of the expectations and desires of the community as a whole; and
- where do you go in the future?

Whilst the strategy initially only had a very broad objective it was nevertheless one of the first such projects of its kind to be undertaken on such a large scale with minimal additional resources.

STAGE 1 - ADVICE TO COUNCIL/COUNCIL ENDORSEMENT

In order to commence the project, the first necessary step was to fully inform Council of the work currently being undertaken and why. Consequently a report was prepared for Council's consideration detailing and highlighting the legislative requirements/statutory obligations of Council in the area of animal management as well as initiatives undertaken to date and those proposed for the future.

Council's activities at the time comprised three major components, which were education, enforcement and Council restrictions.

Education

This component was a method of explaining and demonstrating to Council that the traditional role and/or stereotype of the 'Ranger' had changed and contrary to general public perception the officers did not simply impound and destroy animals. Instead the role had developed into that of public educators who promote and encourage responsible pet ownership and as a result the laws were generally enforced in the interest of public safety and community relations.

The information in the report contained examples of what initiatives had been undertaken:

- press releases;
- school visits;
- patrols;
- talks at community meetings;
- brochures;
- attending at community events, etc.

Enforcement

In this area we highlighted our enforcement ability, practices and philosophy. This included the introduction of multi skilled officers and examples of what action would be taken in certain circumstances, ie. for minor breaches with no attack or injury a caution in the first instance whereas for blatant offences they may result in the issuing of an infringement or even prosecution.

This section gave Council a basic understanding of how an officer would act in certain circumstances. In hindsight, data should have included the number of officers and complaints received together with a breakdown of the issues raised.

Council restrictions

In this area we sought to identify for the Council what issues were mandatory and matters which Council were permitted to vary. For example, in Victoria under the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994, Councils are unable to vary the requirement for animals to be registered but are able to vary the fee paid and their method of restraint in public etc. In addition to the provisions of the Act, Council also has the power, via a local law, to restrict the number of animals per property within the municipality.

In addition to giving Council an understanding of how urban animal management is undertaken, the report also highlighted that due to increased political pressure from individual action groups, there was a need to undertake further community consultation. This consultation would be used as a tool to gauge total community satisfaction with the level and types of services provided.

In recognition of the fact that issues of urban animal management and particularly leash requirements were one of the most contentious/emotional issues facing Council and because previous consultations had lead to the formation of two polarised action groups, the pro and the anti dog group, that had obscured the results, Council resolved to engage a consultant to advise the best method of dealing with the community as a whole.

STAGE 2 - CONSULTATION METHODOLOGY

To assist with the development of a consultation strategy Council, in conjunction with the Cities of Banyule and Boroondara, commissioned Ms Virginia Jackson, of Harlock Jackson Pty Ltd to prepare a paper on the issue. Whilst Ms Jackson's paper 'Taking The Lead With Dogs - Reviewing Leash Laws' 'A Guide To Community Consultation For Local Authorities' did not prescribe 'the best' consultation strategy for urban animal management issues, particularly as each Council is different, it did assess the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Additionally, it gave some information on the reason why action groups are formed and why the silent majority remain silent.

From an integrity and ownership perspective it is imperative that the proposed method of community consultation be approved by Council, as this will hopefully allay any concerns in regard to process and justification for the survey.

Consequently upon receipt of Ms Jackson's paper a further report was prepared for Council's consideration on the different methods of undertaking community consultation and each of their strengths and weaknesses together with a proposed methodology for Council to consider and endorse subject to their consideration.

From Bayside's perspective Council resolved to undertake a number of different consultative approaches but recognised the only certain way to uncover the full range of views is by surveying a random sample of the population. Consequently they resolved to adopt the following consultation process based on Ms Jackson's paper.

Survey/questionnaire

To undertake a random survey/questionnaire of 300 Bayside residents, 250 by telephone and 50 street interviews. The advantages of survey/questionnaires are:

- if statistically valid, surveys provide a quantitative representation of the general community view;
- less likely to be influenced by lobby groups; and
- a way to obtain answers to specific questions.

The disadvantages of survey/questionnaires are:

- expensive to conduct and analyse if contracted.

Focus groups

Arrange and facilitate discussion with relevant interest groups to draw an in-depth understanding of the issues or problems. The focus groups will comprise approximately five to ten people. The advantages of focus groups are:

- useful way of approaching identified stakeholders;
- a way to encourage those who would otherwise feel intimidated at a public meeting; and
- useful tool for drawing out an in-depth understanding of the issues or problems.

The disadvantages of focus groups are:

- meetings are difficult to compare unless an analyst is involved in each one;
- expensive to organise and analyse results; and
- still likely to be dominated by vocal groups.

Telephone hotline

Provide and advertise a dedicated hotline number open to the general public to leave a message in response to recorded prompts which will be transcribed and analysed. The advantages of telephone hotlines are:

- easy and cheap for people to use (more convenient for example than preparing a written submission or attending a public meeting);
- a way to encourage submissions from those who would otherwise remain silent; and
- people able to speak freely without fear of reprisal.

The disadvantages of telephone hotlines are:

- message may be misrepresented in the transcribing;
- some groups (eg. the elderly) may be unfamiliar/uncomfortable with the technology; and
- people may not leave their name, leaving the technique open to potential abuse by action groups.

Displays/exhibitions

Displays were set up in the foyer of the Corporate Centre and the Brighton and Sandringham Libraries describing the project and asking customers to register their views before leaving.

The advantages of displays and exhibitions are:

- a way to encourage written submissions from those who would otherwise remain silent: and
- if staffed, dedicated staff member available to answer questions.

The disadvantages of displays and exhibitions are:

- may be a costly exercise and ineffective, especially if site in a poor location and if community does not perceive the issue to be of high importance; and
- technique open to potential abuse by action groups.

Additionally there is a need to undertake some preliminary investigation and seek agreement in regard to the following limits prior to commencement:

- **Who are the key stake holders?**
ie Dog clubs, other users of facilities (sports clubs), members of the general public.
- **Is your survey group reflective of the community profile?**
How many people are dog owners compared to the community profile, age, gender, etc
- **What background information do we give?**
How much and what information do we give about the process and current practices?
- **What questions do we ask?**
Do we have the expertise to develop a questionnaire, are the questions leading, open or closed questions and will it give us the information we need?
- **Who will undertake the consultation?**
Do we conduct it ourselves or do we have a third party undertake the process?
- **When will the consultation take place?**
Not during Christmas or other holiday periods.

As the above information demonstrates the consultation process undertaken was both inclusive and extensive, and highlights there are a myriad of alternative approaches available.

STAGE 3 - CONSULTATION

Once the methodology has been agreed to it is imperative that the consultation be carried out in accordance with the agreement and any variation of the agreed methodology be endorsed by Council as failure to seek endorsement may cast doubt over the legitimacy of the process.

From Bayside's perspective the consultation process was expanded to include questions about the levels of use, knowledge of existing services and areas whereby the laws and/or services provided by Council could be enhanced.

STAGE 4 - REPORT

Upon completion of the community consultation phase the fun really begins with analysis of the data received. This needs to accurately reflect the process followed and the information provided. The final report also needs to be readable with clear and concise recommendations if possible. Additionally a full copy of the report should be circulated to the members of Council for their information and perusal.

STAGE 5 - REPORT TO COUNCIL

Subject to the results of the community consultation a further report should be presented to Council highlighting any issues and areas of improvement identified together with a strategy to address the issues and a recommendation for Council consideration and adoption based on a needs and cost analysis being undertaken.

RESULTS OF BAYSIDE SURVEY

As a result of undertaking this extensive community consultation Council was in a position to make informed decisions in regard to its future direction, initiatives and funding on the issue of urban animal management. Additionally the exercise tended to unite Council and its' Officers whilst answering the concerns of the individual action and user groups by gaining an understanding of what the community expectations were in comparison to the existing controls and services provided.

The survey results concluded that a majority of the residents considered the leash requirement and designation of off leash areas within our parks and reserves to be adequate. 75% of residents surveyed via the questionnaire, of which 47% were owners compared to the 26% demographically, and 63% overall were in support of Council's existing arrangements.

A summary of the other recommendations and strategies endorsed by Council is as follows:

- **A commitment to continue educating the residents on responsible pet ownership**
Increased funding for education with the production of a pet show bag, attendance at public and community functions, public speaking, production of educational material and sponsorship of pet days and cat shows.
- **A commitment to enforce the laws pertaining to animals and support the officers**
The allocation of additional funding for the employment of staff to police the laws and their support for the Animal Control Officers.
- Support for the existing as well as the establishment of two additional off leash areas including a 24 hour 365 day off leash beach.
- A recognition that dogs, cats and other domestic animals are members of an urban society
The adoption of a position statement with a commitment to give consideration to the needs of owners and their dogs in the development and/or upgrading of parks and reserves. The possible establishment of an annual newsletter for pet owners.
- Increased facilities in parks
The placement of additional dispensers in the parks, increased signage and ability for officers to visit sites and give away free pooper scoopers and show bags.

CONCLUSION

Whilst many would consider undertaking such an extensive and inclusive community consultation process as unwarranted and potentially a waste of Council's resources, I would disagree. As a result of this process for the first time Council was able to base its decisions regarding the issue of Urban Animal Management on facts and supporting data including the community expectation and desires rather than anecdotal information and speculation supplied by staff or an individual action group.

More importantly the survey resulted in a common commitment by Council and its animal control officers and converted its critics through the adoption of the following principles:

- to respect and equitably regulate usage of public land;
- to ensure that there are adequate facilities for owners and their pets;
- to inform the community of their rights and responsibilities;
- to explain the laws pertaining to animals;
- to enforce as and where required the laws pertaining to Bayside; and
- to provide direction and support for the Animal Control Officers.

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Russell McMurray is currently employed at Bayside City Council, Victoria, as Manager Amenity. He has a staff of approximately 70 including full and part-time, and his diverse portfolio includes the management of Animal Control Functions. Russell differs from most managers in that he commenced his career in Local Government as an Officer and has subsequently attained two tertiary qualifications in the field of human services. He is Ministerially appointed as the Local Government representative on the State Government's Animal Welfare Advisory Committee and Responsible Pet Ownership Education Steering Committee. He was also the founder and initial Convenor of the Local Government Professionals, Statutory Services Special Interest Group and has served on other advisory committees dealing with urban animal management issues. This combination of experience and academic qualifications has made Russell and his team leaders in innovation and expertise within their fields, providing advice and guidance to other Local & State Government organisations.

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