

Council discusses relationship with FC Area Humane Society

Mayor wants to sever ties; some want more dialogue

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The strained relationship between the City of Forrest City and the Forrest City Area Humane Society came to a head again — at Tuesday's city council meeting.

No Humane Society members spoke. The discussion was between Mayor Gordon McCoy, who advocates severing all ties with the Humane Society, and several council members who want to take a more measured approach.

The city and Humane Society currently both work out of the Forrest City Humane Shelter, and there has been friction almost since the beginning.

The latest crisis involves the arrest of Roy Hamilton, who heads up the city's animal control unit, on charges of animal cruelty. The allegations were made by members of the Humane Society.

"Unless you've been out of town for the past month, you

know that on May 11 of this month, our animal control director (was arrested) on two counts of animal cruelty," said McCoy. Hamilton is still on the job.

"I believe the charges brought against Mr. Hamilton are fabricated. I think they're wrong, and I'll always say it, based on the history of what I have witnessed over the last two years. This is out of control with the Humane Society at the animal shelter," McCoy said.

McCoy said he is aware that council members Chris Oswald and Glenn Shepherd have been trying to negotiate with members of the Humane Society, "to try to enter into some dialogue and come up with some direction to go with this problem."

He continued, "I think that in light of the current problems that have come up, we need to back away from that discussion...There are some things we're working on...And

the only option that comes to mind with me is going back to what I said a couple of months ago, that we have got to — 110 percent — cut the cord, separate ourselves from the Humane Society. At all costs, I think we need to do that."

He said city employees need some protection.

"As the mayor and as the council, it is incumbent upon us that we do not continue to allow our employees to be in that type of environment," McCoy said. "In my opinion, to continue to operate like we're operating now, where city employees are in that environment, get arrested or face the possibility of being arrested, it is certainly doing them an injustice."

McCoy continued, "Every director I've ever had, I've fought for them all, and as long as I'm sitting in this chair I will continue to do that...I think we have a responsibility as a council and certainly as a mayor, that

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when we recognize that we are in this type of environment, or fostering that type of environment for our employees, that we have a right to correct it."
He said whatever needs to be done, "whatever it takes, we owe our employees that right."
He said anything less than a complete break would simply continue the problem.
"It will never be corrected, it will never be an environment where our employees can work in peace, as long as we continue to operate the way we are. There is nothing you can say to convince me of any other way. I have witnessed time and time again. It's not what I'm being told. It's what I see," said McCoy.
He said in the last two years, several employees have been lost from animal control.
"That being said, I want you to know that Mr. Hamilton is not out there by himself. I'm going to stand side by side with him. The city is going to do whatever it takes to represent him and do everything to make sure he gets fair treatment," McCoy added.
Oswald said he would like to have discussions with the Humane Society.
"I've been giving it a lot of thought, and I agree that I would like to work in a condition

me," said Oswald. "But because some charges have been filed, which are criminal charges, against somebody, that's what the court system is for — guilty or not guilty."
"Another thing I've thought about is, if the council chooses to get rid of the contract that's out there, the amount of free labor we're getting out of them and the amount of stuff they are getting as far as food — I've never gotten that straight from either party. We might be looking at having to hire additional people out there to keep it going. There's no solution tonight."
He repeated his belief that city employees should be supported, but added, "The city can go out on a limb. There's your opinion and my opinion and everybody else's opinion. But until something is resolved with (the charges), I just personally would like to continue some dialogue. There is a lot of emotion going on...There is this turf war going on that we don't need to have."
He said even if the council decides to break all ties with the Humane Society, "The Humane Society is not going to go away. Their organization's purpose is to look out for animals. They'll be there. They may not be physically in the building, but they will be

they will be watching citizens to make sure dogs aren't abused."
He also said a new state law is going into effect on July 1 which may force the city to change some of its animal control laws.
"We've got a lot to work on between now and July 1 to make sure what we're doing is right."
McCoy said there is no emotion between him and the Humane Society.
"I try to stay out of animal control and the Humane Society's business. That's why I have a director," he said.
McCoy said that given the number of animal control employees who have come and gone, "Something is wrong. Something is seriously wrong."
Shepherd said, "This situation didn't come overnight, and it's not going to get fixed overnight, especially tonight...I would like to see us continue a dialogue, hopefully coming to a resolution within the next 90 days, of which way it goes, whether it's a separation of the group with the city, or donating the building to them and building a new one."
He said he believes the animal control department is understaffed, and suggested some training.
McCoy said the animal control officers are scheduled to go to some training this summer.
Charges against Hamilton

include that dogs were not being fed and watered. McCoy said the Humane Society members could feed and water the dogs themselves.
"If I walked in and saw a dog without food and water, I'd get the dog some food and water," McCoy said. "You bear the same responsibility to those dogs as Forrest City Animal Control."
Council member Cecil Twillie offered a cautionary note.
"Could we wait until part of that is settled and then decide what we should be doing?" Twillie asked. "I'm a little leery when we discuss a case that is still in litigation. If I were on a different side, I'd be listening closely to see if I could get some fodder."
He said the discussion was going a little too far.
The council took no action Tuesday.