

COMPROMISE FOR DOGS' SAKE

You see the pictures on fliers posted in grocery stores and vet clinics. Sierra, the young Schnauzer mix found after dark at a church in a small town in Jones County. Cold, scared and hungry. Darby, the 28-pound terrier, found sitting at the side of a busy intersection in rural Jones County. Wylie, a young border collie found on a farm chasing chickens. In late November, Jones County supervisors said no to a request from the Animal Welfare Foundation, the volunteer rescuers of these and other animals, for public land on which to build a shelter. Believing they were never taken seriously, foundation officials are pondering whether to even try a Plan B appeal.

In the new year, both sides should back up and take a fresh look at what should be a win-win, private-public partnership, one that both saves tax dollars and does good deeds.

Nationwide, rescue organizations are invaluable in the never-ending effort to save, rehabilitate and find homes for animals that are victims of human irresponsibility. Many small counties such as Jones rely on rescue groups to run animal shelters.

Before 2003, when Nancy and Mike Crist founded and incorporated the Animal Welfare Foundation, opening their home to a never-ending stream of dogs and cats, the Jones County Sheriff's Office collected strays and left them at various veterinary offices. If unclaimed after seven days, dogs were euthanized.

In four years, the foundation has found homes for 226 stray dogs. Had the county paid to euthanize and dispose of those dogs, the taxpayer expense would have been \$18,080. The foundation also rescues dogs and cats that are abused and neglected.

Last year, the foundation and its volunteers embarked on a \$265,000 fundraising campaign to build a 3,000-square-foot, staffed shelter. It had hoped to lease county land for \$1 a year, an arrangement other non-profits rely on, including several Cedar Rapids museums.

But supervisors said they had no land that's more than a half-mile away (2,640 feet) from a neighboring home, a distance requirement instituted in April for dog kennels. Take it to the planning and zoning board or land-use advisory board instead, supervisors advised the Crists.

Linn County's kennel distance requirement is 100 feet from the next property line. Why the big difference? Jones County residents, who covet open country for its peace and quiet, requested it at land-use public hearings, sharing story after horror story of barking dogs.

But let's hope a non-profit and partially county-funded shelter is not confused with a private, for-profit dog breeding operation, or penalized because of insensitive neighbors who leave their lonely dogs chained outside 24 hours a day.

Animal shelters make excellent and accountable neighbors, with animals kept inside except for scheduled outdoor exercise. The Jackson County Humane Society Shelter, for example, has six neighbors right across the road and nary a complaint. The Iowa City Animal Care and Adoption Center has a neighboring apartment complex and coexists peacefully.

A land-use variance can be allowed if extenuating circumstances exist. For the highly respected, professionally run and public-service oriented Animal Welfare Foundation, due consideration should be given.