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Grebner has one word for animal activists: 'Fanatics'

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Grebner has one word for animal activists: 'Fanatics'

By DANIEL STURM

Apparently, Ingham County Commissioner Mark Grebner doesn't have a lot of patience for activists who are trying to make the county stop selling animals from the shelter for research: "They are a "bunch of fanatics," Grebner declared.

"They're similar to the right-to-life extremists who occasionally assassinate a doctor who conducts abortions," he said in an interview.

Grebner said that the campaign, led by an organization called the Friends of the Ingham County Animal Shelter, has made elected officials waste time and energy and added that commissioners are now receiving mail from Detroit, Alaska and Brazil.

"Those are not my constituents," said Grebner.

He said e-mails to the county from activists a few months ago were so voluminous that they crashed the computer system.

Could Grebner be getting carried away?

Possibly. The chief of the county's management information systems says he doesn't recall any lobbying effort that shut down e-mail communication.

Grebner may be confused, too. At least he appeared to be in his attempt to link FICAS with an organization that he said was linked to a fire at MSU.

"Most of the stuff that FICAS does is under one umbrella with PETA" - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. "PETA was linked to the MSU Agricultural Hall fire bombing. They haven't fire bombed me yet, and I'm not going to be threatened by these people."

Grebner was apparently confusing two incidents. Earth Liberation Front took responsibility for the 1999 Agricultural Hall fire. In 1992, a radical group called the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) took responsibility for freeing

laboratory animals and setting a fire at Anthony Hall. In this second case, PETA issued a press release on ALF's behalf, describing the alleged terrible conditions in which animals were kept.

Responding to Grebner's accusations, Linda Fausey, the attorney for FICAS, said the volunteer organization was not involved in criminal acts on the MSU campus. "It's getting slanderous. It's Grebner's problem if he cannot distinguish between people blowing up buildings and people rescuing animals."

Fausey said the real issue was that people wanted to know why pets are being sold for experiments and why these research facilities aren't able to raise their own test animals. Fausey said concerned residents also wanted to know why Ingham County has tried to "destroy" FICAS, which she called a productive animal rescue volunteer group.

Friends of the Ingham County Animal Shelter was suspended from doing volunteer work in February because the shelter director, Roger Fleming, claimed it had destroyed a "relationship of trust." Fleming accused the nonprofit organization's founder, Allie Phillips, and two other activists of involvement in a scheme to get back an animal that the shelter had sold for research. Phillips, an Ingham County assistant prosecutor, was then suspended and later fired by Prosecutor Stuart Dunnings for her role and unwillingness to apologize.

The turmoil between FICAS and the shelter began in 2001, when the Board of Commissioners voted 10-3 to continue releasing animals to research laboratories for the purpose of medical research. County Commissioner Mike Severino of Holt, who voted against the practice, supports the animal activists in their current struggle.

"They're a bunch of concerned citizens," he said, defending the group against Grebner's accusations. Severino also stated that the shelter currently violates Ingham County's animal adoption policy. Resolution 01-111 favors that animals be placed in adoptive homes and made available for adoption. The option of selling animals to dealers or euthanizing them should be done only when other efforts fail. But volunteers report several instances when pets were killed only shortly before adoption groups arrived.

"It becomes very clear that all the problems stem from one source-the shelter's director Roger Fleming-because he seems to have a personal vendetta with Allie Phillips," Severino said. Severino, and Holt Commissioner John Nevin are forming a Pound Animal Welfare task force to investigate shelter practices. However, they haven't yet managed to convince their colleagues to make the task force part of the commissioners' Law Enforcement Committee, giving it official legal status.

Including Ingham County, there are only eight of the 83 counties in Michigan sell animals to "Class B dealers" (dealers who also purchase dogs from unlicensed sellers), who in turn sell them to research facilities. Ingham sold 26 dogs and 21 cats to these middlemen dealers in 2002.

County Commissioner Lisa Dedden said animal advocates did a good job at making the Board of Commissioners and the public more aware of such shortcomings at the shelter, "and I hope they continue calling public attention to these issues."

Although Dedden would prefer the complete ban of selling animals to dealers, she voted in favor of the October 2001 resolution that allowed the practice to continue, except in instances of product testing because she reasoned that there was still no political majority for a complete ban.

Too many colleagues, she said, were of the opinion that animals that would be put to sleep anyway might as well be used for research projects, which might contribute to our scientific understanding of humans and other animals. "The resolution was realistically the only achievable step at the time," Dedden said. She pointed out, however, that she's looking into additional reforms, including a reconsideration of the Ingham County Animal Control's shelter key functions.

The Capital Area Humane Society's director, Steven Heaven, said at the Commissioners' Board meeting in 2001 that he'd like the county to cease its practice of selling animals for research. In an interview last week, the Humane Society's vice president for development, Gretchen Couraud, confirmed: "We don't sell animals for laboratory research." But not wishing to take a position in the current debate, she stated, "but we also don't comment on the necessity of animal research."

Animal rights groups have criticized selling pets to Class B dealers, who are also permitted to buy dogs from

unlicensed sellers. Legally, Class B dealers must purchase from sellers who can prove that animals are raised on their own premises. But although federal law specifically prohibits the sale of stolen dogs, the U.S. Agriculture Department has taken little effective action, as book author Judith Reitman points out.

The sale of pets for medical research is a dying business in the United States. In large due to the public awareness campaigns of animal rights organizations such as PETA, the nation's medical schools increasingly use bloodless instructional methods over animals for classroom training. And according to a study published in Academic Medicine only 32 percent of medical schools reported using dogs or other live animals in laboratory training in 2001, down from 62 percent in 1994, and 73 percent in 1985.

Severino said he felt "we ought to become a more progressive county." He said he will try to educate his colleagues on animal rights issues, to encourage a majority ban of sales for research. "If we can't educate them, then I hope the constituents will do so at the next election in 2004."

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