

Op Ed- The BOCC Budget Will Be Based on Facts, Not Emotions

When I was elected as a County Commissioner, I was tasked with a fiduciary responsibility to spend your tax dollars wisely. We are not afforded the flexibility to allocate funds based solely on emotions or personal desires. This community should always insist that each dollar budgeted is fully vetted and utilized in a manner that maximizes your safety, well-being and quality of life.

This Wednesday (June 16) at a work session on our future Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), the topic of the future animal shelter took center stage. (The full discussion can be seen in the video [here](#) or view it on [YouTube](#) starting right around the 2:00 mark.)

I have made it known that I believe that animal services and how we care for these animals are an important component to the overall quality of life in Manatee County. I have stated my support of our no-kill policies and I will continue to do so while on this Board. I was one of four votes that has now started the process of creating a local Ordinance banning the retail sale of dogs and cats. I anticipate that Ordinance to come before us later this summer and I will fully support it once again and hopefully see it executed and become law in our county. I understand the emotions of the animal shelter, but I must put them aside and look at things rationally when I am tasked with using your money.

I believe our entire Board agrees that the current animal shelter is well past its useful life and needs to be shut down permanently and expeditiously. When I first took office, I reviewed the plans and was prepared to move forward with the

East County Shelter. However, things took a turn when we learned that the County would be receiving an extremely generous donation of the Bishop Animal Shelter, one of the premier shelters in Florida. Bishop resolves all the issues we currently have with our Palmetto shelter. We, as a Board and as a community, need to factor in opportunities like this when assessing our plans. Clearly, we at least need to ask ourselves if a \$10MM shelter in addition to Bishop is warranted or the best use of your tax dollars?

I have done my due diligence and I believe my proposal on Wednesday was both rational and financially responsible. Until we know exactly what we need once we have Bishop, we cannot possibly know what we must provide out east. However, the CIP recently handed to us reflected the start of the East County Shelter immediately. A financially sensible option is to take control of Bishop in order to assess our capacity needs, service needs and financial needs before making rash, emotional decisions. I proposed leasing flex space or retail space out east on a three-year lease to have an adoption outpost near our population growth. This would most likely cost us around \$150,000 for the full 36 months (assuming \$10/sf for 5,000 sf) plus maybe \$100,000 to build out the space, or around \$250,000 for the three years. This is a far different budget than the revised \$6,000,000 proposed in the CIP. It would give Manatee County a second location, additional capacity and time to truly determine our needs before expending your dollars.

We, as Commissioners, are constantly tasked with making difficult decisions and occasionally unpopular trade-offs for our constituents. They are never easy and there are always parties on each side of every decision. Before I took office, I vowed to always do my homework and always do what I felt was right, even if the opposing side occasionally felt louder or more passionate. I pledged to everyone that I would be fiscally responsible with your hard-earned tax dollars and use

them in ways that maximized the quality of life for all of Manatee County without increasing the financial burden on individual families. This current Board of County Commissioners will remain fiscally conservative with your dollars and we will always stand behind facts over emotions.

Here are the facts versus narrative:

I believe this is a rational plan based on facts and data and not based on emotion and protest. Of course, not everyone sees it this way. Today, we received an email stating that the organization that was fundraising for our animals is pulling out entirely due to the "misrepresentations and half-truths" heard in our meeting. That got me thinking about the "truths" being passed around in the media, on social media and through our inboxes to rile up opposition to our commonsense approach.

- "The Board is ignoring the citizens that voted for this animal shelter. We're ignoring their wishes at the ballot box."

FACT: The Infrastructure Sales Tax was voted on and approved on November 8, 2016. At the time of that ballot, Animal Services was listed at \$1,000,000 (0.3%) to renovate the existing shelter. The Board at that time did not feel the need to allocate funds to a new shelter and were comfortable renovating the current building.

On April 23, 2019 (two and a half years later), the Board unilaterally voted to remove \$8,000,000 from Parks funds (that were voted on by the citizens) and move them to Animal Services to add the new East County Shelter. (You can view the whole discussion here or on [YouTube](#) starting around the 2:05 mark.) In fact, they knew it was going against the voters so they debated moving Animal Services under Parks just to "keep the percentages the same" due to "perception versus reality" so people wouldn't complain about losing funds for tennis courts.

It was at this time, in 2019, when the Board ignored the citizen's wishes and took the voted-on funds that could have been funding our shortfall in boat slips, pickleball courts and pools to reallocate at their personal discretion.

- "The Board is removing \$8,000,000 from Animal Services and leaving them with nothing."

FACT: Manatee County is receiving the incredible gift of the Bishop Animal Shelter. This is a state-of-the-art facility that is substantially better than what we originally intended to build. We are going to improve it even further by allocating \$4,000,000 of these funds to renovating this facility. This is already 50% of the previous Parks funds going toward Animal Services. Additionally, we need to be aware that building something is one thing; operating it is another. Our CIP reflects the revised operating budget for Bishop to be almost \$3,250,000/year, a 20% increase to our existing budget. These additional funds come out of our general tax funds – your tax dollars – in place of other services. We, as a Board, are agreeing to commit these additional funds for the improvement of our Animal Services. Building a second, substantial facility would further inflate this annual budget and further strain our general funds. These are the facts and data that need to be considered when we are responsible for your money.

- "The County is underfunding Animal Services because we don't care about the animals."

FACT: The budget we received, and past budgets, show funds for animal services greater than the allocated funds for affordable housing for our teachers, first responders and others at need as well as allocated funds for Veteran Services, including homeless vets...combined. Yes, as unfortunate as it is, the truth of our budget is that we already spend more funds housing and caring for our animals than we do for housing and caring for our people in need.

While that speaks to the underfunding of these critical human needs, it also puts the funding for Animal Services in perspective.

- “We’re turning our backs on an organization that’s raised \$2,000,000 from the community.”

FACT: Part of the proposal back in 2019 that led to this non-voter approved CIP adjustment to build the animal shelter was a promise of a \$2,000,000 “public-private partnership”. At that Board meeting, it was stated that the then-County Attorney would finalize an agreement with the organization. As of earlier this week, I was told there is absolutely no formal agreement and it’s entirely verbal and good faith. Their website states that they would fund this partnership “as requested” during construction. My personal conversation with them was different. I was told they expect the County to build an \$8,000,000 fully-functioning facility entirely with your tax dollars and then, down the road when it is at capacity, this organization would fund the expansion – with no agreement to guarantee that the taxpayers wouldn’t be held responsible for that cost resulting from protests of overcrowding. As of today, through large donations from Mosaic and a \$100,000 match grant from a Foundation, as well as individual donations via PayPal and a P0 Box on Holmes Beach, their website reflects total contributions of \$332,859 after two years. This is a sizable amount for sure, but far short of the \$2,000,000 pledged in both the initial CIP and the currently presented CIP. You, the taxpayer, would be well on your way to funding this additional \$2,000,000 (above and beyond the \$8,000,000) in place of other CIP projects without an agreement or funds available. Fortunately, their website specifically states, “In the event that the Manatee County Government has not begun construction on the new animal shelter by July 15, 2022, the funds shall be contributed to one or more Manatee County animal welfare/sheltering organizations.” – so this is good news for our animal community.

- Finally, we are told that Bishop “can only handle 60 dogs” so this is not adequate capacity: thus, the need for another \$6,000,000 taxpayer-funded shelter.

FACT: The original two buildings at Bishop have a combined 60 dog capacity. Fortunately, the new \$9,000,000+ facility has 68 individual dog bays in addition to a 250-cat capacity and other wildlife accommodations. This is a combined 128 dog capacity which is over 50% larger than the 80-dog capacity of our current shelter and it exceeds the 120-dog average occupancy of the current shelter. Yes, we do occasionally exceed this average, but a) you cannot always build to a maximum when costs are involved and b) the leased outpost via flex/retail space out east would cover a substantial portion of this deficit.

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