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Ventura County Supervisors Vote to Pursue State Safe Harbor for Public Agencies Following Lawful Transfer of Potentially Dangerous or Vicious Dogs

VENTURA, CA. — The Ventura County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a measure from Supervisors Jeff Gorell and Matt LaVere to pursue state legislation establishing a conditional safe harbor for public agencies following the lawful transfer of potentially dangerous or vicious dogs to qualified nonprofit rescue organizations.

The action allows Ventura County to pursue sponsorship of legislation during the 2027 state legislative session or actively support a substantially equivalent measure introduced by another sponsor.

The proposal is intended to give public animal shelters a responsible option when a qualified rescue is willing and able to accept an animal that might otherwise face lawful euthanasia, while ensuring public agencies do not remain indefinitely liable after custody and control have transferred.

“No one wants to euthanize an animal when there is a responsible and lawful opportunity to save its life,” said Supervisor Jeff Gorell, Chair of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors. “Today’s action gives us an opportunity to pursue a better path—one that saves the lives of animals, protects the public, supports responsible rescue efforts and protects taxpayers from indefinite liability. If an agency follows the law, fully discloses an animal’s history, and a qualified rescue knowingly accepts custody and responsibility, there should be a clear point when that responsibility transfers. Responsibility should follow custody and control.”

The proposed safe harbor would come with strict conditions, including full disclosure of known bite incidents and behavioral concerns, written acceptance of responsibility, standards for qualified rescue organizations, and clear documentation of when custody and control change hands.

“This is about creating clear expectations and accountability for everyone involved,” said Supervisor Matt LaVere. “Strong safeguards and full transparency protect the public while strengthening our partnerships with responsible rescue organizations. When a qualified organization knowingly assumes custody and control of an animal, the law should clearly establish where responsibility rests.”

With the Board’s approval, the County Executive Office, County Counsel, Ventura County Animal Services and the County’s state legislative advocates can now move forward with developing proposed statutory language, standardized transfer and disclosure requirements, identifying a prospective legislative author and engaging stakeholders in preparation for the 2027 legislative session.

“This challenge is not unique to Ventura County. Animal shelters and public agencies throughout California are navigating the same difficult balance between pursuing lifesaving outcomes, protecting public safety and responsibly stewarding taxpayer dollars,” said Julianna Tetlow, Senior Director of Government Relations for San Diego Humane Society. “Those goals should not be at odds. Thoughtfully crafted legislation can provide a responsible path to lifesaving placements while ensuring that a public agency is not held indefinitely liable for decisions made after custody and control have transferred. We applaud Supervisors Gorell and LaVere for taking on this important issue and look forward to supporting their work as the proposal moves forward.”