

The following is the complete text of the OUR TOWN / MANHATAN SPIRIT cover story for July 12, 2001, plus two sidebars and an editorial.

The Best Mayor For Your Pet

**Forget about the other issues.
Fido has his own agenda.**

By Olga Kontozissi

Animals don't vote, but they still have political clout.

Devoted animal rights activists hope the new mayor will spend time taking care of animals as well as people. That includes pets and would-be pets.

These lovers of animals say solving grievous problems affecting animal care and protection in New York City is just as vital as the issues of crime, education and the economy.

"There are a series of issues that just aren't getting addressed," said Elizabeth Forel of The Coalition for New York City Animals, a volunteer organization concerned about animal welfare.

The group says dog and cat overpopulation in the city is growing increasingly urgent. The Center for Animal Care and Control (CACC), which took over the New York City ASPCA contract in 1995, can adopt only a fraction of the animals who are brought into its shelters. The rest are euthanized.

Among the key issues which need a mayor's immediate attention are lack of shelter space, a limited spay/neuter law, and not enough public awareness promoting adoptions and responsible pet ownership.

So, how do the candidates plan to address the problems?

Public Advocate **Mark Green** said, "New York needs to make sure that animals placed in the city's care are provided with the best care possible."

Green said he's disturbed by the fact that more animals are euthanized than adopted. When Green contacted the Department of Health in 1999, he wrote: "Every effort should be made to bring future pet owners together with available dogs and cats."

As mayor, Green said, he would explore ways to increase adoption rates. Green recommended the center take a more innovative and aggressive approach to pet adoptions. To facilitate public awareness, he suggested that the center post photos of adoptable animals on its website, a practice the center has since instituted.

Green said he believes the Department of Health should require the center to provide more humane housing for animals. He also said he will closely examine the feasibility of placing facilities in more accessible neighborhoods.

Green is a proponent of spaying/neutering prior to placing any animal in a rescue shelter, and said he will closely evaluate a City Council-funded plan for low-cost sterilization via traveling van.

City Council Speaker **Peter Vallone** said he has demonstrated his concern about the well-being and treatment of animals and that his door to the animals rights community will remain open.

"As mayor, I will make New York City an animal-friendly town," Vallone said.

Vallone said allegations of animal cruelty should be taken seriously and investigated. "I will work to improve the way animals are treated in the city," he said.

Vallone cited that he passed "a slew of legislation" designed to protect the welfare of carriage horses, which, activists say, is also a serious animal issue in New York City. Vallone stressed those laws should be enforced.

Some things on Vallone's to-do list include working to decrease the number of animals euthanized, exploring a public awareness campaign for pet-related issues, and making sure the center has a committed director and long-term planning.

Also on Vallone's agenda: ensuring that the city complies with the law requiring full-service shelters by July 2002 in Queens and the Bronx.

During Vallone's tenure as speaker, he sponsored legislation requiring spay/neuter for animals leaving pet stores and shelters. He also supports "safe, reasonable and responsible" off-leash recreation.

"Pets are wonderful companions for people," Vallone said, adding that, where appropriate, more pets should be allowed in households. He advocates that a community of tenants should have the right to set policy regarding pet ownership within a building.

"We are all responsible for the compassionate exercise of our stewardship of animals in both domestic and natural settings," said Bronx Borough Pres. **Fernando Ferrer**.

"I am running to be mayor of all New York," said Ferrer, "and I include the pets and animals under our care within that definition."

Ferrer pointed out that New Yorkers license over 80,000 dogs a year, but that there are more than one million dogs and probably twice as many cats that make up pets in the city.

Ferrer said his administration will work initially to address three issues requiring immediate attention: animal population control through spay/neuter policy, expansion of receiving centers, and animal neglect and cruelty.

"It is indeed unfortunate that thousands of dogs and cats are euthanized each year due to overpopulation," said Ferrer. He cited an effective spay/neuter program as the key to reducing kill rates. "I would like the city to strive for zero kills through better public education and innovative public/private partnerships."

Ferrer said he would establish a committee of knowledgeable and experienced animal advocates to make recommendations on animal issue policy, including the reform of the city's animal shelter system. He also outlined humane education in the New York City school curriculum and continued attention to carriage horse conditions.

"My administration will not tolerate cruelty and abuse to animals in New York City," Ferrer said.

Comptroller [Alan Hevesi](#) said his office is in the process of auditing the center operations and that a final report is expected late summer or early fall.

"The audit will include a look at the conditions in the shelters and the efforts made to facilitate the adoption of animals," Hevesi said, adding that he cannot comment further before the audit is complete.

"I will be looking closely at the recommendations my auditors make and fully expect [the center] to implement them in such a way as to ensure the safety and humane treatment of pets."

Democratic candidate [George Spitz](#) described himself as an ardent supporter of animal rights and thinks the city should provide free spay/neuter services. "I would put that on the budget," Spitz said. "We need to reorganize our priorities."

Spitz said there should be fenced-in dog runs at every park. He said he believes pet adoptions should be more encouraged and modest allowances should be handed out to elderly people who wish to have pets but can't afford them.

"We need an all-around more humane society," Spitz said.

OurTown/West Side Spirit did not receive a response to repeated inquiries on these issues from the offices of either Republican contender, [Michael Bloomberg](#) or [Herman Badillo](#).

A spokeswoman for Badillo's office said the office did not have time for the matter due to being busy "trying to get Mr. Badillo on the ballot."

Activists Demand Better Care

Seeking shelter space for animals in need of care and homes

By Olga Kontozissi

Whether it's a permanent or foster home, the city's animals need more of them.

Until they're lucky enough to find a real home, domestic animals lack shelter space. Only Manhattan, Brooklyn and Staten Island have full-service shelters. The Bronx and Queens have "pet receiving facilities" where animals are kept until they can be brought to a shelter.

The animal shelter law requires that those two boroughs have full-service shelters in place by July 2, 2002.

Doris Meyer, a spokesperson for the Center for Animal Care and Control (CACCC), said she doesn't know if the full-service shelters will be ready by next year. She added, "the funds have been appropriated and the center is identifying sites."

More than 60,800 animals were received by the center last year, a figure which includes wildlife.

The total current center shelter has the capacity for only 1,000 animals at any given time. In 2000, the center reported euthanizing 41,207 animals, most of whom were cats and dogs. That number increased by hundreds two years in a row.

"There are different reasons those animals are euthanized," said Meyer. "Some are not adoptable; some are sick. Often people bring us animals to be euthanized because they can't afford the vet bills or for whatever other reason."

"The killing is just barbaric," said Elizabeth Forel. "The new mayor must set up a committee of experienced people to brainstorm and address problems creatively."

Activists say the problematic situation stems from a thoroughly inadequate spay/neuter law. The spay/neuter bill that went into effect in November 2000 applies only to shelter animals and affects a mere 14 percent of pets. The rest comprises pets from a number of sources including pet stores and breeders, not to mention strays. Those animals can and do breed at will.

According to Gary Kaskel of the Shelter Reform Action Committee (an organization working to improve animal shelter conditions and accountability), "There has never been a city-sponsored public information campaign to educate people about the importance of spaying and neutering their pets." He also added that not enough is done to get shelter animals adopted.

Kaskel said the required solution is multi-tiered: educate communities and aggressively promote spay/neuter to lower kill numbers; institute a more humane treatment of shelter animals, including a better volunteer program to walk dogs; and increase off-site mobile adoptions.

"As long as there are so many animals in shelters needing homes," Forel said, "people should not be buying pets from pet stores."

But Meyer said the center does plenty to spread the word about adoptions and the need to spay/neuter. Campaigns include cable television advertising, weekly classified ads in the New York Times and display ads in train schedules.

The center also holds several events a year in all five boroughs where information is relayed and promotional material is distributed.

"I don't think [the advertising] is sufficient," said Meyer. "But we can't afford to advertise more in New York City. We do the best we can."

A humane education law that was passed more than 50 years ago and intended for schools was never mandated due to insufficient funding. Kaskel said plenty of municipal funds are available they're just misallocated.

In 1997, Kaskel began a campaign in which 75,000 signatures were collected for a ballot initiative to create a separate municipal Department of Animal Affairs. (Currently the Department of Health handles animals.) But the motion was defeated in court.

"It's not as if there aren't enough people out there who care," Kaskel said.

"The next candidate for mayor must address [these problems]," he said, pointing to other cities such as San Francisco and the states of New Hampshire and Michigan, which have more successful programs in place for such matters.

Kaskel also stressed that domestic animals are not the only ones needing attention and that several welfare and protection issues exist with wildlife and the CACC as well.

Democratic Contenders Have Pets of Their Own

Getting to know the pets behind the candidates

By Olga Kontozissi

For some mayoral candidates, animal issues hit close to home.

Of the seven candidates running this fall, four said they have or had pets of their own.

Peter Vallone's pet is an 11-year-old cat named Piccolo. He's a gray and white tabby who was rescued by Vallone's family from a shelter, where he was brought as a stray.

Piccolo is no ordinary kitty. He eats fruit. He also fancies goldfish and, in fact, helped himself to all the goldfish in Vallone's Japanese garden. "Now there is no fruit and no goldfish in the garden," said Mattis Goldman, a spokesman for the campaign.

Mark Green currently has no pets, but when he was younger he had a dog for a long time. His name was Skip.

Fernando Ferrer has a Cocker Spaniel whom he is "head over heels over," according to campaign spokesman John Del Cecato. The five- or six-year-old dog's full name is Winston Churchill Ferrer.

Comptroller Alan Hevesi's cat of 14 years died last year. The half-Himalayan and half-Siamese was named Smudge the Cat. She had the markings of a blue point Siamese and the trademark long hair of a Himalayan.

Democratic candidate George Spitz has no pets, but said he plans to adopt a retired racing Greyhound this year.

A Republican candidate, Michael Bloomberg, does not have any pets.

An aide to the Herman Badillo campaign said Badillo has no pets due to his wife's allergies.

EDITORIAL

Examining Pet Issues

Granted, it's not the most pressing question you could ask yourself upon arriving on Election Day at the polls.

But some voters with furry friends who play a key role in their lives might find themselves wondering: Who would be the best candidate for my cat? Or dog. Or bird. Or ferret. Or pet of choice.

Certainly, pet owners comprise a significant source for votes, so it's not all that surprising that candidates take positions on animal-related issues. The Democratic candidates for mayor, in particular, answered questions put to them for our cover story this week.

One question asked was whether candidates themselves had pets. Council Speaker Peter Vallone has a charming story about his adopted stray. Others have tales of pets who have touched their hearts.

It's reassuring to have leaders with a soft spot for pets. In the end, though, the more pressing questions are about public policy. And in a city with so many animals—pets and would-be pets desperately in need of adoption—there are legitimate political issues.

The next mayor should start, in terms of animal issues, by making sure that past promises are kept. Particularly one big promise: The city is supposed to open full-service shelters in Queens and Brooklyn in 2002. That should happen.

Beyond that, though, the next mayor should use the mayoralty as a bully pulpit for issues that belong back on the front burner. Animal advocates say and they're right that education remains a paramount priority.

The value of spaying and neutering cats and dogs can hardly be oversold. Pets from city shelters are legally required to be spayed and neutered, but those animals comprise only 14 percent of pets.

The Center for Animal Care and Control (CACC), given the current limits on funding, can hardly afford to wage a citywide advertising campaign. But our next mayor can draw attention to the importance of spaying, registering and protecting the city's pets.

Yes, more pressing issues do confront our city, with none more critical than the declining state of the educational system. But it's okay and perhaps even wise for pet-lovers to want a mayor who shares their values.
