

Growth plan sends animal shelter down the street

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By Bella Travaglini, Globe Correspondent | June 14, 2007

Since opening in Salem in 1976, the Northeast Animal Shelter has harbored and placed 90,000 stray cats and dogs, with only one ongoing complaint: lack of space.

Now that's fixed. On a drive along Highland Avenue last year, the shelter's executive director, Randi Cohen, spotted a for-sale sign on the sprawling property that once housed Kelly Honda.

"I never drive up that way," Cohen said. "So, here was this sign. I called, and here we are."

Cohen and her staff are laying out plans to move the shelter from 204 Highland Ave., site of the 2,000-square-foot space they have leased since its inception, to the 13,000-square-foot building just down the road at 347 Highland Ave. The shelter spent \$2.2 million for the former Kelly property.

As it sought to purchase its own property for the first time, the nonprofit organization met with some opposition from the city and also had to obtain a zoning change.

Mayor Kimberley Driscoll initially asked the shelter to reconsider purchasing the prime commercial property, since it meant Salem would lose the \$34,000 in property taxes it had collected from Kelly Honda. Since then, the shelter and the city negotiated a payment in lieu of taxes, a common arrangement between tax-exempt organizations and municipalities.

"We have agreed to pay the same amount that Kelly was paying -- the \$34,000," Cohen said.

The Zoning Board of Appeals approved the change required by the shelter last year.

The final piece fell into place for the shelter when it recently closed on a \$3.26 million bond deal with the assistance of the Massachusetts Development Finance Agency, which helps arrange financing for nonprofit organizations, affordable housing and other projects. Cohen said the shelter will use the additional million dollars for specialized renovations.

She said the new digs are well worth the wait.

"We had to find the perfect space, and we did," said Cohen. "We have businesses on either side with woods in the back. This property provides us with the best space with minimal impact on neighboring homes. And, we're still on a main road."

Crews last month began demolition work, preparing to transform the former dealership into a shelter with specialized isolation rooms, kennels, offices, and training rooms. The project is expected to be completed by December.

"The new space will be beneficial for everyone, especially the animals," said Patty McNamara, the shelter's manager and foster care coordinator. "The cats will have their own room separate from the dogs. And the yelping puppies will be in their own room. It will be less stressful for all of them. I'm particularly excited about expanding our programs like the greyhound rescue program."

Once the building is ready, dozens of homeless cats and dogs will make the trek a few blocks along Highland to their new home. Cohen does not expect any lapse in operations, she said, but the shelter may limit the intake of strays that week to decrease the number of animals taking the trip.

"We will be able to help so many more animals in the new location," Cohen said. "We are very excited about also expanding on the school, senior, and community programs we offer."

The staff consists of six full-time employees and 20 part-time employees with about 50 volunteers. The new space will allow for increasing the volunteer staff to 200, Cohen said. "We'll have no problem bringing on more volunteers -- we have a waiting list."

As one of the largest no-kill shelters in New England, it placed 2,500 animals last year and plans to double the number once it relocates, Cohen said. Northeast Animal Shelter relies entirely on donations to fund its operating budget.

More information about Northeast Animal Shelter is available at its website, northeastanimalshelter.org.

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