



Giving Dogs and Cats in the Bow Valley a New Leash on Life

The bond between humans and their companion animals is legendary. For Winston Churchill, the relationship was forged with Charlie the parrot (still alive, by the way, at the ripe old age of 104). For Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King it was through his beloved Irish terrier, Pat. My spouse and I share our lives with a cantankerous tabby cat Miscouche and Shorty, a bundle of wiggles barely contained in a Sheltie-mix dog.

The unconditional love that flows from animal to human causes us, as individuals, to make every effort to protect and care for our own animal friends. We also make stars of fictional animals such as Lassie, Morris or Rin Tin Tin and spend thousands of dollars on toys, games and images of the likes of Winnie the Pooh, Garfield or Scooby-Doo.

But as a community, the bond isn't always so strong nor the story so stellar. In 2003, 163 cats and 93 dogs were found stray or abandoned in the Bow Valley. Given current population growth trends, these numbers are expected to triple in the next ten years.

Based on the 2003 census, 35% of permanent households in both Banff and Canmore have a dog, and 61% of permanent households in Canmore have a dog or cat. The need for a way of dealing with both the strays and the families who may wish to add an animal companion to their household is certain. What can we do to ensure the safety and well-being of the dogs and cats who live (or may come to live) in the Bow Valley?

The answer lies with the Bow Valley SPCA. Established as a registered charitable organization in 2001 and with a land lease secured near Elk Run Boulevard, a June 2003 leash-cutting ceremony unveiled plans for the first No-Kill, No-Cage Adoption Centre of its kind in Canada.

Though local veterinarians and dedicated individuals have made monumental efforts over the years to shelter and adopt out stray animals, there is no facility dedicated solely to that purpose in the Bow Valley. Vet clinics or private homes are not equipped to act as full-time adoption facilities nor offer comprehensive educational programs and the strain is showing. These are among the priorities for the Bow Valley SPCA.

First, the new building will provide greater sensitivity to the needs of the dogs and cats that will temporarily call the facility home. Progressive design eliminates the stacked cages and narrow runs of old. Here, room is planned for dog cabins, cat chalets, indoor and outdoor play areas in a relaxed, animal-friendly environment. The benefits are many. Reduced stress, improved house-training, easier socialization with other animals and positive stimulation improve each animal's chances of a successful adoption. The no-kill policy means that only animals too ill to be treated successfully or too aggressive to be safely placed will be euthanized.

Second, the SPCA is intent on awareness and education within the Bow Valley to increase the level of responsible pet ownership. The Spay/Neuter program is at the leading edge of the community outreach program. Not only focused on an accountable approach to pet overpopulation, the SPCA will also encourage humane attitudes and practices among the youngest and oldest in the valley through school and community group programs. Some

animals may need to live with foster families until they are adopted, and this will be a golden opportunity for individuals and families in the Bow Valley to become involved.

As demonstrated by such no-kill, no-cage facilities elsewhere in North America, success comes from community spirit, creativity, support and involvement. And though the doors aren't scheduled to open for business until 2006, there is much to be done in the interim. There is already a dedicated group of volunteers, of which I am but one, who are bringing their interest, skills and energy to the task. Generous individuals have made donations, many have participated in SPCA special fund-raising events and several local businesses have made important contributions as well.

February is the time when we traditionally declare our love for our family and friends. Why not include the dogs and cats of the Bow Valley on your Valentine list by making a contribution to the SPCA's February fund-raising campaign? Look for a flyer in your mail box and contribute generously. Your time and commitment are just as important, and I invite you to enjoy the rewards of involvement with this devoted and passionate group.

For more information about the No-Kill, No-Cage Adoption Centre, please call the Bow Valley SPCA info line at 609-2022, or view the web site at www.bowvalleyspca.org. You can also e-mail to info@bowvalleyspca.org to ask about specific ways you can bring your talents and enthusiasm to this worthwhile endeavour. Donations can be sent directly to: Bow Valley SPCA, P.O. Box 8154, Canmore, AB T1W 2T9.

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