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Ground is broken for future animal shelter



Animal groups and Williston city officials gather to break ground for the future Williston Animal Shelter. Seen here with shovels are Mary Flickinger, Police Chief Dennis Strow, Robert M. Echols, president and founder of Our Friends the Animals, Susan Holmes of Williston Animal Group (WAG), Wayne Carson, director of the city animal services department and Bob Levesque, president of Levy Animal Friends.

Story and Photos By Terry Witt, Senior Staff Writer

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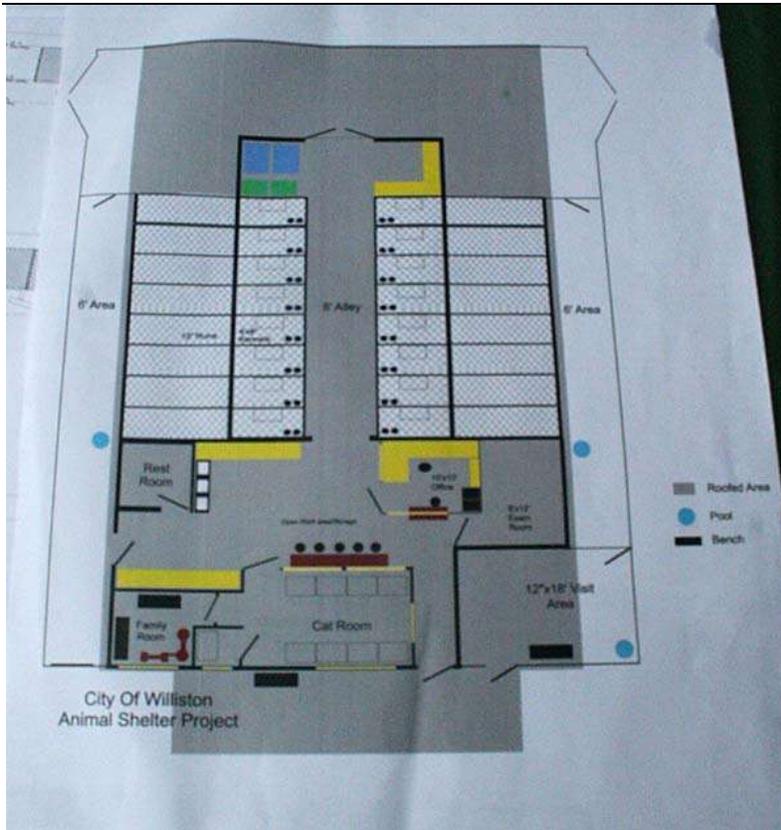
WILLISTON -- Ground was broken Thursday (Dec. 7) at the Williston Municipal Airport for a \$280,000 air-conditioned and heated animal shelter to be funded and operated through a public-private partnership with the city.

When construction of the 2,000 square-foot Williston Animal Shelter is completed, the volunteer groups known as Levy Animal Friends, Our Friends the Animals and Williston Animal Group (WAG) will give the facility to the City of Williston for operation of its animal services department.

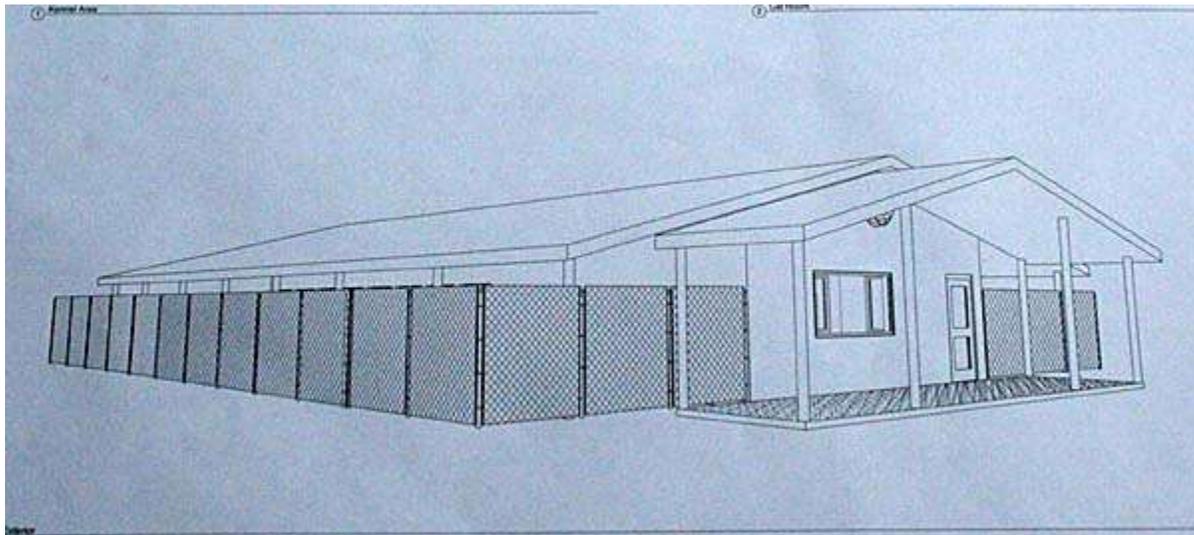


A group of residents gathers for ceremony breaking ground for the new Williston Animal Shelter. Bob Levesque, president Levy Animal Friends, speaks about the future of the new facility.

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This drawing shows the interior features of the future Williston Animal Shelter.



The drawing shows the exterior and interior views of the future Williston Animal Shelter

Bob Levesque, president of Levy Animal Friends, said the Williston City Council will be asked to approve a resolution calling for the establishment of a citizen advisory group and the use of volunteers to work in the shelter caring for the animals.

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The facility will be constructed on a seven-acre site at the Williston Municipal Airport a short distance down the road from the Pyper Cub Café and Restaurant, and the Williston Municipal Airport terminal.

Levesque said his group and others working on the project hope to raise \$100,000 in donations next year for the project. One-third of the money has been secured through a private foundation and the city is being asked to apply for a \$75,000 USDA grant and provide any other in-kind services or materials it can afford, he said.

Levy County Commissioner Matt Brooks of Williston was on hand for the groundbreaking ceremony. Brooks said he was impressed that the city and volunteer groups have formed a public-private relationship to get the project done.

“I’m very excited about it,” he said.

Levesque said the long-range plan is also to build a better shelter for Levy County Animal Services through a private-public partnership similar to one being employed for the Williston project.

Brooks said it was an interesting concept but he hasn’t heard of anyone approaching the county with that concept and he is absolutely certain no one has appeared before the Levy County Commission with the proposal.

But he added that maybe everyone can learn from the public-private partnership being used in Williston to build and operate the future Williston Animal Shelter.

Robert M. Echols, founder and president of Our Friends the Animals, who is actively involved in the project, said the shelter will be a place where dogs and cats that are suffering can be housed in a safe and caring environment.

Williston Animal Control Officer Wayne Carson has built an educational program for younger children through mural painting, building cat climbing obstacles, poster-making, paw print art, creating videos teaching pet care, tours of the facility, drawing and photographs, coloring contests and designing and building many items.

Carson told the assembled group of animal lovers that by giving children tours of the new facility and educating them about animal care he believes more adoptable animals will be brought to the shelter and placed with loving families.

Levesque said the community of volunteers in Levy County is frustrated with the Levy Animal Services department and its director David Weatherford for his refusal to bring volunteers into the county shelter. The county shelter is located at the landfill. One volunteer reportedly works at the shelter.

Brooks said he raised the issue of volunteers with County Attorney Anne Bast Brown and her response was always “liability.” She is concerned with the possibility that volunteers could be injured at the county facility and the county commission could be held liable.

Levesque said the City of Williston is more “volunteer-friendly” than the county. He said the advisory group will be available to offer input to the city to ensure the new Williston Animal Shelter is operated with the appropriate level of care for the animals housed in the facility.