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## **County Commission agrees to fund 50 new kennels for Levy County Animal Services; *Benefactor pledges to reimburse lion's share of project***



**Levy County Finance Officer Jared Blanton, CPA, sits in his office in the Levy County Courthouse on Tuesday morning (Feb. 19) during an interview. Blanton works in the office of Levy County Clerk and Comptroller Danny J. Shipp. Blanton helped the County Commission have the ability to properly accept hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations in reimbursement over time from Bob Echols, president of For Our Friends The Animals, where Echols has agreed to help the county significantly improve the holding area for stray dogs and cats in Levy County.**

**Story, Photos and Video**

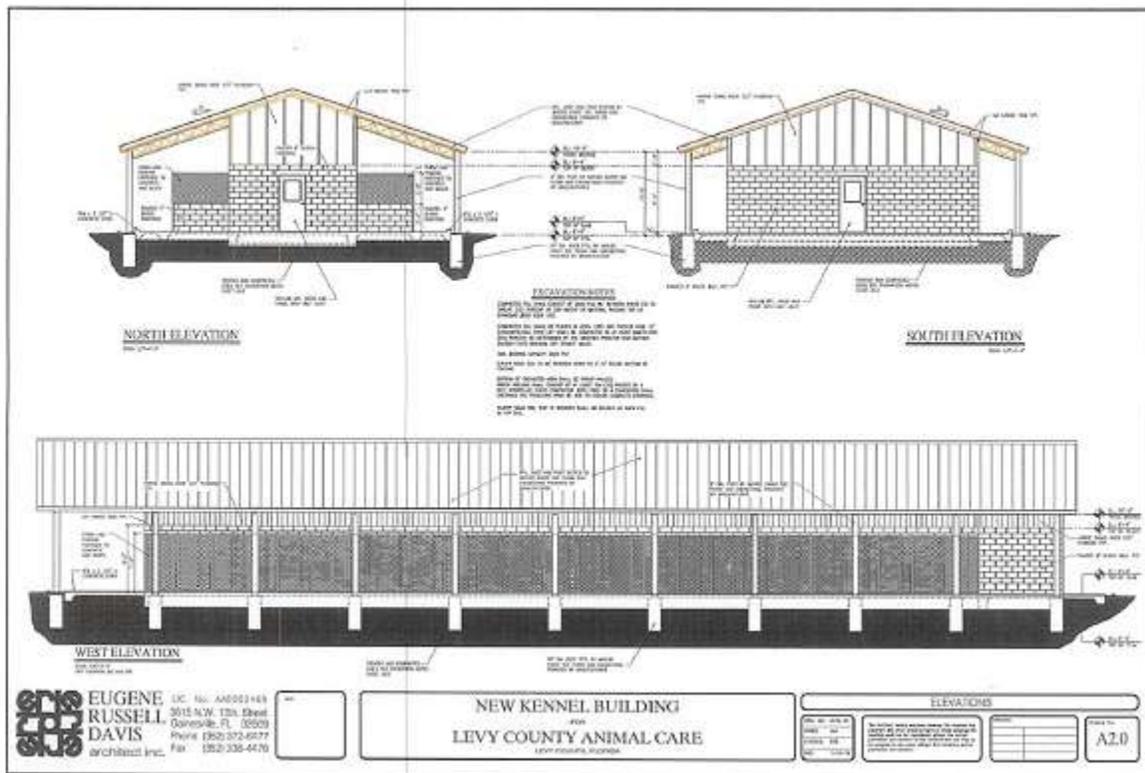
**By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 20, 2019 at 10:39 a.m.**

***Architectural Drawings Provided By Levy County Commission***

**LEVY COUNTY --** The Levy Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved a plan to significantly improve the housing unit for animals at the Levy County Animal Services facility, located on the property near the solid waste transfer station between Bronson and Williston.



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The drawings above are some of the architectural work before the first shovel breaks ground on the project. Levy County Animal Services Director David Weatherford promised there will be a groundbreaking ceremony when this project starts. During his professional career as the leader of Levy County Animal Services, Weatherford has continually improved the county's handling of problems of cat and dog overpopulation, and other issues related to animals in Levy County.

*Architectural drafts provided by the Levy County Board of County Commissioners*



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**The two photos above are of Needles the cat. He is the first of many community cats that have been spayed or neutered in Levy County. This program is helping reduce the overpopulation of feral cats in the county. Needles is definitely a community cat, finding people in the unrecorded subdivision of Jemlands who feed him and give him water. He not going to be any female cats' kitten-daddy, because of Levy County's program to sterilize cats that are captured in the wild, neutered or spayed, and then returned to their lives as outdoor neighborhood cats. Needles has his left ear tip removed to show that he is not a viable kitten-maker. The City of Cedar Key adopted a similar program years ago to help control its cat overpopulation.**

In an interview Thursday morning (Feb. 21), County Commissioner Rock Meeks said the County Commission agrees with a plan to accept a significant donation for the project that will add 50 kennels, as well as add rooms for other needed operations in the department that provides the public service of the collection and management of stray and abandoned cat and dogs.

An interview with Levy County Commission Vice Chairman Matt Brooks the day before (Wednesday, Feb. 20) reflected the same truth.

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks said in a telephone interview on Thursday morning (Feb. 21) that he is pleased the county has a partner who is willing and able to help improve the lives of Levy County's furry friends while they wait for their forever homes.

Robert M. "Bob" Echols of Ocala, the founder and president of For Our Friends The Animals, let the county staff know that he wanted to donate to help improve the facility for Levy County Animal Services. He is the friend of Levy County to whom Chairman Meeks referred.

From the point where Echols let county staff know of his intent, architectural drawings have been created and discussion about the County Maintenance and Construction Department completing a lot of the work has happened.

And then it came time to put this project in the budget.

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Finance Officer Jared Blanton, CPA, let the County Commission know, however, that County Clerk Danny Shipp, who is the comptroller for the County Commission, could not approve the project for \$220,000, or so, because Echols and the For Our Friends The Animals is not the state government or federal government.

Blanton explained that Comptroller Shipp is tasked with protecting the County Commission's assets. When Blanton creates a budget, the revenue side of the ledger is as important as the expenditure side of the books. A private donor's promise for reimbursement is not appropriate to budget for future expenses, Blanton said.

Therefore, Blanton offered the County Commission a work-around. By transferring \$300,000 from the capital outlay reserve for the project that is estimated in the \$225,000 range for materials for completion, this is now able to be budgeted properly.

Some of the cost of the project is being logged as the Levy County Maintenance and Construction Department's labor costs. Jimmy Jones leads the construction and maintenance department, and that group's work will be noted in this construction project.

As Echols donates to the county, Blanton said, those funds will go back into the reserve part of the budget, from whence they were transferred.

Blanton said the County Commission must, in this case, budget as if it was not going to be reimbursed by the donor. If this was money coming from the state or federal governments as a grant or as a grant-loan agreement, Blanton said, that would be different – because those bigger governments are more acceptable for that type of budgeting purpose.

Given Echols' continual proof of being trustworthy and of caring about the wellbeing of animals, Blanton said, the County Commission chose to accept his word as being equal to a grant from a larger government, rather than from a private interest.

Blanton said that after this transfer, there is about \$600,000 in that reserve fund.

Meanwhile, Echols is well-established as a benefactor for animals in Levy County. He is the reason there is a Cat Room at Levy County Animal Services.

To see the story on that 2016 Cat Room action, click [HERE](#).

**<https://youtu.be/rvmrmHcIrljI>**

**In this video, Bob Echols cuts the ribbon to open The Cat Room in 2016.**

*Video by Jeff M. Hardison*

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