

# ROWAN ANIMAL TALK

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## Back Then, Now, and the Future

In this article I would like to take a look from the historical perspective of animal welfare issues in general, with a focus on Rowan County in particular. Across the United States millions of dogs and cats end up in shelters each year. Specifically, according to the ASPCA, about 7.6 million animals of which 2.7 million are euthanized. I think all folks that care about animals can agree that these are staggering and sad numbers and that something needs to be done about it.

While it is obvious that there is still much to be done, it also does need to be said that across the nation, and here in Rowan County, we have made some great progress. I think that if we allow ourselves to lose sight of that it makes it too easy to give up trying to do more. The long term goal should be to arrive to a world where every pet has a good home with caring humans. We will not be there tomorrow, but we need to keep progressing.

According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) the first public “pounds” were created in the 1700s to impound stray livestock. As society became less rural, these were switched to be pounds focusing mostly on dogs. At that time there were no rabies vaccines. Rabies was both common and a death sentence to anyone exposed. Stray dogs were considered a great threat to public safety. After WWII, rabies vaccinations became mandatory. Over the next four decades as rabies was all but eliminated, the focus of pounds turned to nuisance and aggressive animals. They also became a place for citizens to take unwanted pets. By the 1980s we started thinking of the facilities as shelters, with the goal of transitioning adoptable animals into new homes.



Source: <https://www.loc.gov/item/me0093/>

I think it is worth noting two things here. The goal has always been to provide a public service to citizens, starting with public health protection, which continues today, and later to help with citizen pet and owner issues. Each county is required by the state to have a plan of action including resources to deal with enforcing rabies laws. Having a shelter and working hard to humanely address pet overpopulation issues is a choice of each county’s citizens. I think it is fair to say that our citizens, working through the actions of our county government’s Board of Commissioners, have done a great job here that should be recognized as such.

Again, let’s look at how things have progressed. According to HSUS, before 1970, shelter populations and euthanasia rates in the US were on the increase. Shelters were routinely euthanizing about 100 pets per 1,000 humans in their communities. But, things were changing. Over the following 20 years a strong base of advocacy for spay and neuter, along with access to high volume lower cost spay/neuter clinics, started to become the norm. By the 1990s the numbers had dropped to 12.5 pets euthanized on average per 1000 humans in shelter communities.

In Rowan County we saw improvements as well. Each year the NC Department of Agriculture publishes a Public Animal Shelter Report for shelters. These reports can be viewed online. In the 2010 report, Rowan

County Animal Shelter took in 6,713 cats and dogs combined. Of these 5,563 were euthanized (or 83%). By 2013, a great improvement was seen. Of 5,490 animals, 2,023 were euthanized or less than 37%. Last year we took in 4,568 animals with only 394 euthanized or less than 9%. Since 2010 there has been a yearly decrease in euthanasia's.

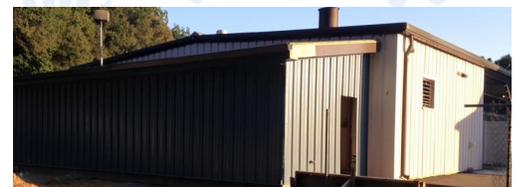
There are several factors for this reduction but I think everyone will probably agree that one of the most significant factors was the development of, and cooperation with, rescue groups. Rescue groups are citizen volunteers that work hard as a "halfway house" to permanent re-homing of animals. The rescues are a wonder to behold. Sometimes it is a small group or even one person doing it all. Often rescue adoption of an animal from the shelter involves a network of people that span the country. Some parts of their network are totally involved in fund raising to get funds for adoption fees, spay/neuter, or other veterinary costs. Local foot soldiers do the physical work of picking up the animals and transporting them to the vet. In many cases, different folks then come in and provide long distance transportation. Sometimes that involves crossing state lines and may send an animal as far away as Maryland. These people are tireless and dedicated. Many work other jobs and quite honestly, I don't know how they do it.

The county has stepped up to the plate as well. In 2010 the annual budget for the animal shelter was \$632,870. Last year the budget was \$1,021,378.

Also, I should mention the staff. These people work hard and often long hours. It's not always fun, and is often disheartening work. I urge you to come and get to know them-and adopt a pet.

Some exciting things have happened this year. Financed by Christine Morykwas, the new cat wing opened. The dog run floors were resurfaced with state of the art finish paid for with county dollars. We have just hired a veterinarian that will be starting in December. That alone has the potential to move us dramatically forward in many ways. A multi purpose building expansion funded by Shelter Guardians has just been completed. Also, our County Commissioners recently approved 12 adoption events annually with generously reduced adoption fees.

With all of the money spent and work put in, have we made any progress? Yes! Obviously, the euthanasia's have gone down dramatically. But also, the intake of animals has declined as well. Not as dramatically, but steadily. This is all because a lot of people care- rescues, staff, county government, and the public that supports us to move forward. We don't intend to stop doing so. We look forward to seeing even more positive changes.



The new multi-purpose building expansion at the Animal Shelter is now complete. Photos courtesy of Shelter Guardians.