



## POLITICAL ANIMALS

### Animal rights activists scrap tooth and nail over the mayoral election

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

Cops, congestion, and corruption may be the top issues dominating the May 17 mayoral runoff so far, but many hope to lengthen the list to include cats, coyotes, dogs, and other animals. Los Angeles has long had a lively, sometimes-fractious animal welfare community, and this year it has been working hard to inject animal-related policy issues into the mayor's race.

It's a tricky task for the animal welfare community and cuts a treacherous path for mayoral runoff candidates as well. Incumbent Mayor James Hahn set himself up as the original candidate non grata among animal activists early in his term when in 2001 he fired L.A. Animal Services General Manager Dan Knapp, an ordained minister and nationally known innovator in animal services reform who empathized with those rescuing animals from euthanasia in L.A.'s overcrowded shelters.

Hahn then selected Jerry Greenwalt, whom Knapp had fired from Animal Services, and who was notorious for his old-school management style that activists equated, as one phrased it, to "treating animals as solid waste." Greenwalt retired last year after nine months of pressure that included picketing at both his house and the mayor's home, plus some distinctly un-civil disobedience: "Murderer" was spray-painted onto Greenwalt's car.

But Hahn's challenger, Antonio Villaraigosa, also finds himself on shaky ground with some activists, who

complain that, as a councilman, he hasn't been aggressive enough on animal issues. Still, Villaraigosa hasn't accrued a fraction of the acrimony that Hahn has, probably because he doesn't have as much power over city appointments. In fact, he has garnered the support of some key advocates. At a summit organized by Citizens for a Humane Los Angeles on a rain-soaked morning in January, Villaraigosa won 39 endorsement votes from the 100-plus participants, second only to then-mayoral-candidate Walter Moore, who won the Citizens' endorsement but was soundly defeated in the March 8 election.

That morning, Villaraigosa also took a bold stride onto the swampy turf that is animal welfare politics and pledged that Hahn's newest appointment as General Manager of L.A. Animal Services, Guerdon Stuckey, would not head the department under a Villaraigosa administration. Stuckey was director of the Rockville, Maryland, Department of Neighborhood and Community Services before being hired by Hahn in November 2004. He was an unpopular choice with the animal welfare community because of his lack of previous experience with animal issues. And he wasn't much helped by the residue of the Knapp firing and Greenwalt's tumultuous tenure.

Villaraigosa's declaration at the summit was perhaps a gesture to a long-dissed community who had made no bones about their initial aversion to the mayor's choice. Emotion runs high because of the stakes: Some 39,000 dogs and cats, most normal and healthy, were killed in Los Angeles city shelters last year. They got there by being lost, or turned in by owners as incorrigible or inconvenient, while others come from unwanted litters. When the shelters overflow, which is always, healthy animals get the needle.

But the political terrain surrounding Stuckey's appointment has somehow shifted since January: Despite the community's hate-Hahn stance, it seems he did something right. The once-reviled Stuckey has won many of the activists over.

Melya Kaplan is one. Kaplan is a founder of the Venice Voice for the Animals and a Villaraigosa supporter. "He believes in coalitions. He believes in working with people who care about an issue," she says. But she also likes Stuckey, although she was suspicious at first. "I'm not now," she says. "He's worked beautifully with Christie Metropole and Scott Sorentino of the Rescue Alliance," which includes some 45 Los Angeles animal rescue organizations. Kaplan allows that nobody knew Stuckey. "A lot of people screamed and yelled because he had no rescue or humane experience," she says. But, she says, noting that animal services has been troubled since its inception 35 years ago, "right now he's doing better than anyone's done in a looong time." As for Villaraigosa's promise to dismiss him, she suggests "it wasn't that he was saying this about Guerdon. Antonio was saying that any person in the city not doing a good job will be replaced."

Michael Bell, of Citizens for a Humane Los Angeles and another Villaraigosa supporter, says that he objected to Hahn's appointing Stuckey while ignoring the animal welfare community's consensus candidate, attorney Terri Macellaro. He now gives Stuckey much credit for meeting with his detractors. And, says Bell, an actor who has worked to improve animal shelter conditions and battled against coyote trapping, "When I run into a situation, I call Guerdon, he says he'll do something about it - and he does."

Not everyone is pleased. The Animal Defense League, which led the picketing and pressure on former manager Greenwalt, still has harsh words for Stuckey. "He simply does NOT have the background necessary, nor the expertise to see that big picture and STOP THE KILLING NOW," reads the assessment on ADL's stopthekilling.net website. The website also has a section on Hahn; the page features blood-red letters that spell out "HAHN SUCKS!"

Pamelyn Ferdin, an ADL-LA leader and one of five activists who last week won an acquittal on trespassing

charges that stemmed from leafletting at Hahn's home, does concede that Stuckey is better than Greenwalt - faint praise coming from her. And she doesn't like Villaraigosa either, calling him "a slick politician, always wheeling and dealing, who won't look you in the eye." She favored candidate Bob Hertzberg, edged out in the primary by Hahn by a mere fraction of a percentage point.

Despite Stuckey's humane community supporters, Ferdin says they don't realize what's going on in the shelters because they don't go in. She maintains that ADL's contacts within the system still report hellish conditions for the animals there.

Stuckey says he is focused on saving animals' lives and making Los Angeles into a genuine no-kill city. The polite term for eliminating animals is "euthanize," but Stuckey won't use it. "I say killed," he says. "The community needs to learn the downside of this issue." In the four months he has held the position, Stuckey has ordered signs posted in shelters that spell out to those relinquishing animals that the critters will most likely not make it out alive.

He talks about working at a grassroots level with communities to make residents understand how their behavior - letting animals run loose and breed - contributes to problems like the packs of feral dogs that roam streets south of downtown ganging up on other dogs and human pedestrians. Routinely "fixing" animals is the proven way to drop shelter kill rates, and Stuckey has a plan to offer free spay-neuter services to low-income residents, and build on L.A.'s system of offering spay-neuter vouchers through rescue groups.

But even Stuckey supporters fear that a lack of funding will make that impossible. "He can't afford to do it for free," says Bell.

Stuckey stepped into a volatile situation when he accepted the job, says Animal Services Commission President Kathy Riordan, who has served on the board for seven years. She admires his attempts to bridge the gaps between the humane community and the department, but real challenges remain. "It would be easier to put him in a straitjacket in the middle of a minefield and have him hop on one foot," she says.

Villaraigosa's campaign has softened its position on Stuckey as head of L.A. Animal Services, responding to his growing fan base in the animal care community without actually backpedaling. "He doesn't feel obligated to keep Stuckey in there," says Nathan James, a campaign spokesman. But if the potential mayor-elect sees progress and improved conditions with the community, he will consider keeping Stuckey in his current position. "It depends," says James, "on what the situation looks like when he gets there."

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