

Houston Is Better than BARC

ANNISE PARKER'S PLAN TO IMPROVE HOUSTON'S BUREAU OF ANIMAL REGULATION AND CARE

POLICY BRIEFING

On so many levels, it's long past time to fix our city's troubled Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care – more commonly known as BARC.

BARC's failures impact our public health, public safety and quality of life – and for the many Houstonians concerned with animal welfare, BARC's failures are just plain cruel. As an animal lover myself, I deplore the conditions at BARC.

These issues are not new to me. I served on one of the committees of the Mayor's Task Force for Animal Protection in 2005. The Task Force came up with some excellent recommendations; yet, many have not been implemented. As City Controller, I later led an audit of BARC that highlighted additional problems and inefficiencies – many of which have yet to be corrected.

If elected mayor, I will do everything within my power to make sure BARC becomes a humane and adequately funded no-kill shelter.

Too Many Problems

BARC's problems include:

- **Staff and funding** - BARC staff and funding (which I will discuss later) are the major problems. The staff, which is being increased somewhat this year, is poorly paid, insufficiently trained and supervised, and has low morale.
- **Abuse and neglect** - Reports flood my email weekly. There is no excuse for this, and it must stop immediately, even if we have to install surveillance cameras. Abusive employees must be fired, and employees must feel free to report abuse to superiors (which they are apparently not doing) instead of to volunteers.
- **Vaccinations** - Animals must be vaccinated as soon as they arrive to prevent outbreaks of disease, such as distemper, a source of far too many complaints and tragedies. Efforts are underway to vaccinate animals on the trucks.



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- **Inhospitable atmosphere** - Rescue groups and volunteers must be welcomed with open arms.
- **Adoption outreach** - Efforts to send animals to rescue groups and foster homes must be maximized.
 - **Poor Air Conditioning** - The poorly designed and constructed air conditioning system does not consistently and adequately cool animals and staff.
 - **Software** - All staff members are not adequately trained to use BARC's software. This creates a situation in which we cannot accurately account for the number of animals that come into BARC, or the number of animals euthanized.
 - **Animal control officers (ACOs)** - There are not enough ACOs for such a large city.
- **“Corridor of Cruelty”** - A tragic example of challenges facing BARC is the so-called Corridor of Cruelty in far northeast Houston. BARC must identify those parts of Houston known to be areas where animals are abandoned or allowed to run loose. BARC should perform regular sweeps to ensure they do not become havens for stray animals.

These big sweeps should be coordinated with rescue groups, such as the highly successful Corridor of Cruelty rescue group, so that as many animals as possible can be rehabilitated and given homes. BARC should work closely with the SPCA, the county and the district attorney to target and break up dog fighting rings since they are a major source of many stray animals found in areas like the Corridor of Cruelty.

We Know the Solutions

- **Listen to the experts** - We must implement these recommendations: the Mayor's 2005 Animal Task Force (on which I chaired a committee); the Controller's audit (which I led); and the \$11,000 MCV Consulting study, which needs to be made public. I supported, for example, bringing in no-kill shelter advocate Nathan Winograd to help BARC improve operations.
- **Maddie's Fund coalition** - Ultimately, we need to form a regional or city coalition similar to the New York City mayor's coalition that created a 10-year, no-kill transition plan and won more than \$10 million in Maddie's Fund grants. This represents the gold standard and is by far the most money out there to help animal service agencies.
- **Transferring adoptions** - In the meantime, I would strongly consider transferring the city's animal adoption responsibilities to more successful groups in exchange for



the city assuming sole responsibility for – and hopefully drastically reducing – the number of animals so old or sick they must be euthanized.

- **Education** - More emphasis needs to be given to general animal education outreach – stressing the importance of spaying and neutering as well as having a valid license for all animals. I'd like to see regular neighborhood “sweeps” to identify unlicensed pets and those that have not been spayed or neutered.
- **SNAP and Fix Houston** - We must increase the city's partnership with organizations such as SNAP and try to restart the Fix Houston initiative to dramatically increase the number of animals spayed and neutered. BARC just added funding for 4,000 more spays and neuters this year.
- **Puppy mills** - More emphasis needs to be given to identifying and shutting down these houses of horror.

The Challenge of Funding

BARC is not adequately funded. Mayor White's new budget does increase BARC's funding by about \$600,000. I also understand there is \$1.9 million already set aside to build a new adoption center. We may be able to use these funds for another purpose if necessary. There is also as much as \$2 million tied up in a contested will. Unfortunately, because of the recession and current budget constraints, it is unlikely there will be significantly more general fund dollars available for any new programs next year.

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As a result, my job as mayor will be to identify ways we can do more at BARC and in the community – with pooled resources and far more volunteers motivated by a new BARC with a written transition plan to become a no-kill shelter.

– ANNISE PARKER

Quality of Life

When BARC fails to operate as efficiently and effectively as it could – including failing to treat animals as humanely as possible – it fails to fulfill a critical function necessary to quality of life in Houston.

BARC's failure to adequately pick up stray animals means that some of Houston's neighborhoods are infamous for having too many strays – a situation that is potentially hazardous not only to the animals but also to people who come into contact with them.

Because BARC does not adequately fulfill its educational role, many Houstonians are not informed about the proper care and treatment of animals. At the very least, these problems add up to an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars. Thousands of adoptable animals die needlessly at BARC each year.

Houston, we can do so much better.