



Coachella Valley Animal Campus Commission Meeting (Minutes)

Animal Campus Commission

Voting Members

Cathedral City

Nancy Ross **Chair**
Ernesto Gutierrez (Alternate)

City of Coachella

Frank Figueroa
Yadira Perez (Alternate)

City of Desert Hot Springs

Daniel Pitts
Dirk Voss (Alternate)

City of Indian Wells

Greg Sanders
Bruce Whitman (Alternate)

City of Indio

Glen Miller
Kim Hardee (Alternate)

City of La Quinta

Steve Sanchez
Kathleen Fitzpatrick (Alternate)

City of Palm Desert

Karina Quintanilla
Evan Trubee (Alternate)

City of Rancho Mirage

Michael O'Keefe **Vice Chair**
Eve F. Edelstein (Alternate)

District 4

Supervisor V. Manuel Perez
Ty Peabody (Alternate)

Non-Voting Members

Animal Samaritans Ex-Officio

Tom Snyder
Aurora Wilson (Alternate)

Loving All Animals Ex-Officio

Michael Phipps Russell
Jessica Castillo (Alternate)

PSAS Ex-Officio

Dan Rossi
Tamara Hedges

RCDAS Staff

Mary Martin
Dr. Kimberly Youngberg
Dr. Itzel Vizcarra
Lesley Huennekens
Outcomes for Pets
Veronica Perez
Kasey Saldarelli

Thursday – April 02, 2026

9:30 a.m.

Commission Meeting

In-Person

1. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE – Led by Vice-Chair Michael O'Keefe, with the City of Rancho Mirage.

2. CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The Coachella Valley Animal Campus Commission Meeting was called to order on Thursday, April 02, 2026, at 9:30 a.m. in person by Vice-Chair Michael O'Keefe, City of Rancho Mirage.

A roll call was conducted by Vice-Chair Michael O'Keefe with the City of Rancho Mirage; it was determined a quorum was met. The following Commission members were present:

Member Attendance: Quorum Met

- Cathedral City, (**not present**)
- City of Coachella, (**not present**)
- City of Desert Hot Springs, Councilmember Daniel Pitts
- City of Indian Wells, Councilmember Greg Sanders
- City of Indio, Community Member Kim Hardee (Alternate)
- City of La Quinta, Councilmember Steve Sanchez
- City of Palm Desert, Councilmember Karina Quintanilla
- City of Rancho Mirage, Mayor Pro Tem Michael O'Keefe (**Vice Chair**)
- County of Riverside, District 4 – Community Member Ty Peabody (Alternate)

Ex. Officio's Attendance:

- Tom Snyder, Animal Samaritans
- Michael Phipps Russell, Loving All Animals
- Tamara Hedges, President, Palm Springs Animal Shelter
- Dan Rossi, Executive Director, Palm Springs Animal Shelter (**not present**)

Staff Attendance:

- Mary Martin, Director, RCDAS
- Kim Youngberg, Asst. Director, RCDAS (**not present**)
- Dr. Itzel Vizcarra, Chief Veterinarian, RCDAS

- Veronica Perez, Public Information Officer, RCDAS
- Luis Rosa, Lieutenant of Field Services RCDAS
- Kasey Saldarelli, Commission Secretary, RCDAS
- Amrit Dhillon, County Counsel, Riverside County
- Outcomes for Pets Consultants for RCDAS

3. UPDATES TO AGENDA:

- No Applicable Updates.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

The minutes from February 5, 2026, were approved, with a motion by Greg Sandera (City of Indian Wells) and a second by Kim Hardee (City of Indio).

5. AGENDA AND STAFF REPORTS: This is the time and place for RCDAS Staff and Ex-Officios wishing to address the balance of the Commission.

5.1 Riverside County Department of Animals Services

- **RCDAS and Outcome for Pets (Consultants)** - The Director's Report is available online for review at www.RCDAS.org.

The Director's Report highlighted recent progress and ongoing challenges within Riverside County Animal Services, particularly in the Coachella Valley. January and February data showed the dog live release rate increased to 88.5%, continuing an upward trend, while euthanasia due to space constraints dropped dramatically from 77 dogs in 2023 to fewer than 10 this year. Dog and cat intakes increased slightly, likely tied to long-term impacts from reduced spay and neuter services during the pandemic.

Staff shared several major accomplishments from the past year, including an increase in the overall release rate from 75% to 85%, a 40% reduction in euthanasia, expanded shelter hours, and \$4.8 million in additional county funding. New staffing positions were added for adoptions, foster, rescue, enrichment, and veterinary services, including the hiring of a Chief Veterinarian and additional full-time veterinarians.

Leadership discussed the strain created by multiple large-scale rescue and hoarding incidents over the last two years, including house fires, hoarding cases, wildfire responses, and deployments assisting with emergency animal rescues outside the county.

Current priorities include reducing overcrowding, improving daily enrichment and playgroups for dogs, increasing foster and volunteer participation, and supporting pet owners who are struggling to keep animals in their homes. New initiatives include expanded rescue partnerships, off-site adoption opportunities through

PetSmart in Pico Rivera, increased spay and neuter clinics, and stronger partnerships with outside veterinarians providing advanced medical care.

Recent field operations included a Hemet house fire involving 65 dogs, with most small dogs adopted within 24 hours, and enforcement sweeps in North Shore that resulted in multiple impounds, citations, and spay/neuter assistance for residents. Veterinary staff also highlighted completion of 676 spay and neuter surgeries during Spay and Neuter Awareness Month and expanded Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) services during kitten season.

A major focus of the presentation was the success of the Ironwood Dog Foster Program, which places long-term shelter dogs with incarcerated foster guardians. Approximately 50 dogs have participated so far, with several already adopted, including by facility staff. The program provides dogs with extensive human interaction, training, and improved socialization while also positively impacting incarcerated participants.

Department staff concluded with recognition of community partners supporting surgeries, rescue, and adoption efforts. Staff also highlighted successful adoption events, including a midnight adoption event where 171 animals left shelters in one day through adoption, fostering, rescue, or reclaim. Upcoming fee-waived adoption promotions, including Barkchella, were announced, along with requests for donations of blankets and towels to support shelter operations.

5.2 Ex-Officio Members

- **Ex. Officio – Tamara Hedges - Palm Springs Animal Shelter** – Tamara Hedges with the Palm Springs Animal Shelter reported that the Faux Fur Ball fundraiser raised \$820,000, which supports not only shelter operations but also a wide range of Coachella Valley programs, including community cat initiatives, pet food assistance, spay and neuter services, vaccinations, and wildlife care through the Desert Wildlife Center in Indio. She also highlighted the importance of protecting wildlife during nesting season, urging the public to avoid trimming trees and hedges from February through September due to the significant harm it can cause to birds and other animals. In addition, she noted ongoing challenges with large-dog length of stay at the shelter, even with strong volunteer involvement and enrichment programs. Finally, she shared that the shelter is currently renegotiating its contract with the City of Palm Springs, explaining that rising costs of animal care and medical services require increased funding support to sustain and expand services across the region.
- **Ex. Officio – Tom Snyder – Animal Samaritans** - Tom Snyder provided a quarterly recap, reporting that through the first quarter Animal Samaritans adopted 73 dogs and cats, rescued 155 additional animals primarily from the Coachella Valley Animal Campus, served 4,643 pet owners, provided \$21,223 in financial aid, and completed 1,491 spay and neuter surgeries. He also shared updates on new partnerships with the cities of Palm Desert and La Quinta to provide free voucher-based spay and neuter services for residents. Additionally, he discussed

collaborative efforts with local animal welfare organizations to address the Brown Dog Tick issue in the Oasis and Thermal areas through vaccinations and targeted free spay and neuter clinics for large dogs, while emphasizing the importance of doxycycline treatment prior to surgery to address potential blood-borne diseases.

- **Ex. Officio – Michael Phipps Russell – Loving All Animals** – Michael with Loving All Animals reported that the organization opened a donated veterinary clinic earlier this year, formerly the Cat Clinic, to provide spay and neuter services for community cats, operating about twice a week when possible. He also announced that board member Lindy Biggi recently entered escrow on the former VCA emergency clinic building at Jefferson Street and Highway 111, which will be used to relocate and expand their current clinic as their lease is expiring. He explained that the new, significantly larger facility will allow greatly expanded spay and neuter capacity, improved surgical space, and additional infrastructure such as boarding for dogs and cats, food distribution, and potential programs like kitten and puppy nurseries and foster support services. The goal is to increase lifesaving services and reduce euthanasia in the region while avoiding displacement of services at other local veterinary facilities.

6. COMMISSION MEMBER COMMENTS: This is the time and place for any Commission member wishing to address the balance of the Commission.

- **Cathedral City – Councilmember Nancy Ross (Chair)** – Absent
- **City of Coachella – Councilmember Frank Figueroa** – Absent
- **Desert Hot Springs – Councilmember Daniel Pitts** – Daniel Pitts announced that his local jurisdiction approved a transition from fireworks shows to drone shows beginning in 2027, while maintaining a traditional fireworks display in 2026 for the nation’s 250th anniversary celebration. He stated the change would benefit pets, veterans, and others affected by PTSD.
- **City of Indian Wells - Councilmember Greg Sanders** – Indian Wells had nothing to report at this time.
- **City of Indio – Community Member Kim Hardee (Alternate)** – Kim Hardee provided an update on expanding animal welfare efforts across the East Valley, highlighting a major two-day spay/neuter clinic at Fantasy Springs Resort Casino on April 22–23. Three mobile veterinary units could complete up to 180 surgeries, with additional outreach planned for Torres Martinez Indian Reservation and Oasis. Animal Samaritans will assist by handling surgeries for larger dogs. Hardee emphasized that rescue groups, nonprofits, and county agencies are beginning to collaborate more effectively, which she described as encouraging progress.

She praised county improvements and programs such as the prison dog initiative but noted that serious challenges remain. In particular, she focused on the rising cost of veterinary care, sharing an example of a parvo treatment initially quoted at \$6,000. She said many pet owners are forced to choose between debt and euthanasia because

affordable emergency care is limited. Hardee also raised concerns about landlords increasingly refusing pets, leading to more animals being surrendered when families move.

Hardee explained that her clinics provide more than just spay/neuter services. They also offer vaccines, microchips, registration assistance, dog tags, and education to help keep pets out of shelters. Recent clinics vaccinated and microchipped more than 200 pets each, demonstrating strong community demand for affordable services. She noted that even charging small fees helps owners feel invested in their pets while keeping care accessible.

She also discussed the challenges of outreach in immigrant and non-English-speaking communities, where fear of ICE and distrust of authorities can prevent people from seeking help. Hardee stressed the importance of treating pet owners with respect and building trust rather than judging them. She closed by encouraging continued cooperation among organizations, inviting rescues to submit adoptable dog photos for display at the Fantasy Springs event, and thanking volunteers, especially Shelley from Coachella Valley Animal Campus.

- **City of La Quinta – Councilmember Steve Sanchez** - Steve Sanchez thanked everyone for the updates and highlighted several community and animal welfare ideas. He supported exploring drones for city events as a quieter alternative to traditional displays and noted the importance of protecting nesting birds. He strongly backed the Ironwood prison dog rehabilitation program, saying it benefits both incarcerated individuals and animals, and suggested expanding similar efforts to youth programs with potential state and county funding. Staff shared that feedback on the program has been largely positive so far. Sanchez also outlined upcoming initiatives in La Quinta, including a developing animal services voucher program, a mobile spay/neuter clinic at the La Quinta Library on April 16, and a pet adoption event during the city’s birthday picnic on April 25. He proposed creating a citywide pet supply donation drive (food, blankets, toys) similar to Toys for Tots, potentially involving all cities in a friendly competition to boost participation. He also reminded nonprofits about La Quinta’s quarterly grant program offering up to \$5,000 for community-benefiting projects, including animal welfare efforts. Finally, Sanchez emphasized the importance of public education, suggesting “Did You Know?” campaigns to help residents better understand topics like veterinary costs, animal tethering rules, and responsible pet care.
- **City of Palm Desert – Councilmember Karina Quintanilla** – Karina Quintanilla supported friendly intercity competitions to encourage stronger animal welfare efforts across the county. She also commented on drone use for public events, expressing disappointment that her city did not move forward with it, but encouraging other cities that are exploring the idea. She highlighted environmental reuse of prescription pill bottles, noting they cannot be recycled but can be reused by shelters for dispensing animal medication. She also thanked Tamara Hedges for the “bunny napper” reminder, emphasizing the importance of leaving wild baby rabbits undisturbed in spring. In Palm Desert, she discussed efforts to improve pet adoption support by expanding vouchers and adding financial assistance for necessary supplies like collars, crates, and other setup costs, stressing that adoption expenses go beyond just fees. She also asked how confiscated animals such as chickens are handled in hoarding cases and whether there are adoption pathways for them.

Additionally, she requested improved meeting processes, including receiving presentations ahead of time and using electronic check-ins to help with efficiency and language barriers. Dr. Itzel responded that chickens from hoarding cases are quarantined for health monitoring and then made available for adoption like other animals. She noted they are often placed through regional shelters such as Riverside and San Jacinto, where demand is higher, and are listed under “other pets” in the system.

During the Director’s Report presentation, Karina asked about the role of the department’s 76 per diem employees and whether the prison dog program could expand to juvenile facilities or California Youth Corrections. Public Information Officer Veronica Perez explained that per diem staff work across nearly all department functions, particularly in clinic support roles, and noted that while future expansion of the prison dog program may be possible, there are currently no plans to expand it to additional facilities.

- **City of Rancho Mirage – Councilmember Michael O’Keefe (Vice Chair)** – Michael O’Keefe with Rancho Mirage thanked Mary, the staff, and their team for their leadership and support, including assistance with the Rancho Mirage Rescue Rally and special recognition for Brad, who drove the bus. He also thanked Animal Samaritans, Loving All Animals, and the Palm Springs Animal Shelter for their partnership in the event, which included vaccinations, dog adoptions, and spay and neuter services.

Michael O’Keefe congratulated the Palm Springs Animal Shelter on the success of the Faux Fur Ball and thanked the organization for providing valuable wildlife services through the Desert Wildlife Center.

Michael O’Keefe suggested that speakers who need more than three minutes should submit written statements so their comments can be properly reviewed and entered into the record, and he commended Brad for highlighting that option.

- **Fourth District and Ad Hoc Committee Member Ty Peabody** – Ty Peabody (District 4) highlighted strong progress in the County’s animal welfare programs in 2025, including 11,397 pet adoptions, 585 dogs transported out of the area for placement, and 17,349 spay/neuter surgeries. He praised the animal services commission for being more proactive and collaborative, credited organizations like Animal Samaritans and the Palm Springs Animal Shelter for their work and thanked both officials and the public for supporting these efforts. Overall, he described the system as significantly improved, while noting there is still more work to do.

7. PUBLIC COMMENTS: This is the time and place for any person wishing to address the Coachella Valley Animal Campus Commission on items not on the agenda. Comments require a speaker card including name for the record and are limited to 3 minutes per person, unless determined otherwise by the Commission chair.

- **Lisa Blodgett:** Handed out booklet – Oasis Trailer Park. Lisa Blodgett described serious animal welfare issues at Oasis Trailer Park, including neglected and injured dogs, and praised rescuers who provide care and spay/neuter support. She said these

advocates are unfairly accused of “dog theft” and argued such disputes should be handled by law enforcement, not social media. She called for stronger enforcement of animal cruelty laws and proposed an MOU between Riverside County Animal Services and the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians to improve enforcement through education, checks, and citations.

- **Christine Ziegler**: Christine Ziegler, a Palm Desert resident involved in the Fido program, suggested a long-term improvement for animal services: creating satellite shelters to reduce overcrowding at a single facility. She said this could lower stress for dogs and make it easier for potential adopters to see and connect with individual animals, improving adoption opportunities.
- **Chris Jones**: Handout – No Animal Should Live Like This. Chris Jones described serious animal welfare and public health issues in Oasis Trailer Park and Thermal, including past tick outbreaks that caused illness and deaths in dogs from diseases like Ehrlichiosis and Anaplasmosis. He supported vector control and a long-acting prevention program but said participation needs to increase and offered to help coordinate using his own records. He also raised concerns about uncontrolled breeding, limited spay/neuter access, and high euthanasia rates for large dogs. He urged funding for mobile surgical units and a centralized county spay/neuter calendar to improve coordination and reduce preventable animal deaths.
- **Brad Anderson**: Brad Anderson submitted written public comment to provide input. He noted his work removing dogs from Oasis and the Eastern Coachella Valley, and said individuals can still help when coordinating with others. He also referenced a reported hoarding case in Thermal, saying he knew the person involved and believed they were overwhelmed while caring for neglected dogs. He supported collaborative efforts on animal welfare and kept his comments brief.
- **Alan Woodruff**: Alan Woodruff asked the Board of Supervisors to consider temporarily loosening California spay/neuter rules in Riverside County to help address large populations of free-roaming dogs in areas like Oasis Trailer Park and the eastern Coachella Valley. He proposed allowing field sterilization without an owner present, similar to TNR approaches, and said local veterinary groups would support it if legally feasible. He also said conditions in these communities have remained largely unchanged for decades, making outreach difficult and sometimes unsafe. Woodruff urged the county to reduce shelter intake and euthanasia, arguing the current system is unsustainable and saying many adoptable dogs are being lost unnecessarily.
- **CR Craig**: CR Craig expressed concern regarding District Supervisor Perez’s absence from the meeting, noting that constituents value direct participation from their elected representative whenever possible. He shared updates on foster dog Todd, adopted after recovery from Valley Fever through the Animal Rescue Center of California, and another dog, Clyde, whose skin condition improved after coordinated care involving a volunteer groomer from Barkingham in Palm Desert and county vet approval. He urged better coordination between the county and volunteers like groomers to streamline care and donated services. He also mentioned helping rehome a German Shepherd and advised that emotional support animal letters from medical professionals may require landlord accommodation.
- **Dale Balukes**: Dale Balukes focused his comments on three main areas of animal welfare and enforcement. First, he criticized high veterinary costs, naming large

corporate providers like VCA and suggesting they should be publicly called out in favor of more affordable, “dog-owner friendly” clinics. Second, he encouraged public awareness campaigns to normalize treating dogs as part of the family—such as letting dogs sleep indoors or be more integrated into household life—especially to prevent suffering during extreme summer heat. Third, he strongly advocated for cracking down on backyard breeding and informal puppy sales, referencing platforms like Craigslist and public venues. He suggested stricter enforcement, including potential sting operations and fines, to deter illegal or irresponsible breeding and reduce the number of dogs entering shelters.

- **Ginny Weissman**: Ginny Weissman, Executive Director and Founder of Pet Ministry PS, marked the organization’s 17th anniversary and reported more than 100 adoption events and over 800 adoptions. She said owner surrenders and abandonments are increasing, largely driven by housing restrictions, deposits, and pet rent. She proposed a “pet relief roundup” program, inspired by checkout donation models, where small add-on donations at local merchants would fund assistance for pet housing costs like rent and deposits. She suggested a Palm Springs pilot program offering support such as \$300 vouchers, along with medical care and food assistance, to help prevent relinquishments and reduce shelter intake. She also referenced coordination with shelter leadership and similar “keeping people and pets together” models used by groups like My Dog is My Home.

8. ANNOUNCEMENTS

8.1 The next Animal Campus Commission Meeting is scheduled for **Thursday, June 04th, 2026, at 9:30am.**

(**Location:** Desert Recreation Metro 8: 81725 Highway 111, Indio, Ca 92201)

9. ADJOURNMENT:

Meeting adjourned at 11:11 a.m.