

By David Daniels, a brief history of what our commissioners have done so far.

It recently came to light that in late 2023, Manatee County commissioned an Animal Shelter Facility Needs Assessment study from Animal Arts, a nationally respected shelter design architecture firm. To my knowledge, this report was not made public.

An AI response stated: “The (Animal Arts) report was never presented, debated, or discussed in a public meeting. The complete absence of this report from the public record indicates that the study was commissioned and reviewed internally, bypassing standard public notice procedures and open meeting discussions.”

We now know that the county internally rejected the advice of the experts they hired, choosing to go with a cheap, short-sighted shelter design using large prefabricated kennels instead of the recommended best practice brick and mortar facility.

Furthermore, while this decision short-changed the community and the county’s own employees, budget data makes it clear there was little concern in reining overall county spending. More on that below.

But first, a look at the events leading up to the Animal Arts report.

A review of the shifting shelter strategies

On March 28, 2023, the Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved a concrete block kennel building for the gifted Bishop property. The kennel building would be in addition to the existing upgraded Bishop medical building.

Just four months later, on July 25, 2023 — following a county-funded field trip to Nate’s rescue (a bus was rented for a large contingent of high-level county officials) — Commissioner George Kruse convinced the BoCC to abandon the concrete block design. Instead, Kruse pitched Nate’s style prefabricated “cottages.” Nate’s Honor Animal Rescue Center, in East Manatee, typically houses around 20 dogs, mostly puppies, in cute, colorful prefab buildings, each containing four or six individual kennels. Kruse emphasized the low cost of “little four- or six-packs for \$40 grand.” Construction manager Tom Yarger, who was part of the field trip, informed the board the cottages could be completed in 10 months. Interestingly, changing the shelter design from concrete block to prefab cottages *was not* on the meeting agenda, meaning there was no public comment.

The actual agenda item was to receive an update from then Animal Services Chief Sarah Brown on the status of several suggested policy changes the BoCC had asked her to implement in that previous March 28, 2023, meeting. For example, the BoCC had approved three new staff positions. They also directed Brown to work with Sheriff Rick Wells to utilize inmates to walk dogs and perform other shelter chores. They directed Brown to hold five Adoptapaloozas per year, one in each district, and they gave her \$2,500 a month to spend on marketing the dogs for adoption.

Instead of an update, Brown presented a generic slide show of department services. What happened to the cottages?

It is now clear that sometime after that July 25 meeting, something about the cottage design must have raised concerns. Perhaps project designers realized that using the Nate's model for a shelter the size of Manatee would require at least 25 separate cottages, 25 electric service laterals, 25 water services, 25 sewer lines, etc.

But whatever the reason, in late 2023 the County commissioned Animal Arts to compare two options — neither of which included the previously approved Nate's style cottages:

Option 1: A best practice, brick and mortar shelter housing 110 dogs, play yards, offices, storage, laundry, a shower for staff, and a customer service lobby all in an air conditioned, publicly accessible building. Estimated cost: \$20.6 million.

Option 2: Seven prefabricated kennel buildings housing 112 dogs with a separate administration building including offices and customer service. Due to budget constraints, a storage building and play yards were excluded, to be considered in the future. Estimated cost: \$6 million.

The county ultimately chose option 2, plus play yards, for a total cost of \$11.5 million.

Since the prefabs were installed earlier this year, the county has spent huge sums on band-aid measures, including adding fencing, shade tents, gravel walkways, canopies, hose outlets and drainage grates. Bolts that stuck out had to be hacksawed, sharp edges had to be filed down, fences had to be secured, gates had to be relocated. All of this just to make the prefabs safe and functional. None of the modifications address the inefficiency and lack of public access.

Additionally, the consent agenda for the commission's meeting Tuesday includes item 19, a change order adding another \$1.4 million for "permanent" tents, canopies, noise dampening and fence screening.

In their report, the experts at Animal Arts concluded that Option 2 was "NOT RECOMMENDED." Quoting directly from the report:

"A short-term building is never a good idea, as it costs much more in the long run. An animal shelter should be designed for this thirty-to-forty-year lifespan from its inception. It should be resilient, energy efficient, industrial in quality, highly durable, sanitary, and welcoming. It must be able to withstand 24-7 use by highly destructive dogs, numerous staff members, volunteers, and the general public."

And:

"In Option 2, the dog capacity is accommodated via prefabricated dog housing, which is not the best quality compared to what would normally be recommended for housing dogs in a municipal animal shelter. The replacement and life cycle costs of the prefabricated kennels will thus need to be accounted for. The shelter will also need an addition in the future for additional storage..."

And:

"Option 2 is not recommended because, by definition, Option 2 does not include all the essential facilities needed for full and ultimate operations, and therefore will have a detrimental impact on staffing efficiency, as well as the long-term costs of the project."

Although the report was completed and released internally in December, 2023, it was not made public or discussed at any BoCC meeting. This allowed county leaders to ignore the significant problems described in the report without any public transparency or pushback.