

Guest column | Manatee County administration's unlawful attempt to silence the Animal Advisory Board

Board member says county officials not following their own rules for what they can consider

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By David Daniels / Special to The Bradenton Journal

At the initial June 17 meeting of the newly formed Animal Services Advisory Board, Commissioner George Kruse kicked things off by clearly setting the stage. He told

ASAB members, "This is your advisory board. ... We (county staff) are just here to facilitate."

Turns out that the county administrator disagrees. At the second ASAB meeting on Aug. 12, the administration introduced a new, made-up rule declaring that the ASA was "not authorized" to discuss Animal Services "operations." Alongside this new announcement, the administration abruptly cancelled at least 25 items that ASAB members had submitted for discussion.

How do I know this newly declared rule was made up by the administration? For on at the June 17 meeting, county staff distributed materials detailing the ASAB's role, duties and responsibilities. None of these reference documents — nor any staff presentations — mentioned that the ASAB is not authorized to review Animal Services operations.

In reality, the informational material established the exact opposite. A reference document titled [OVERVIEW OF THE ASAB PURPOSE](#) states in bold that the board's **core purpose** is to "provide thoughtful advice and recommendations on policy and *operational* questions related to animal services and welfare..."

Furthermore, that same document, also in bold, listed key duties of the ASAB to include "making recommendations on future funding, resources, and operational options for the County's animal control operations.

Neither Commissioner Kruse nor any of the county's guest Subject Matter Expert speakers mentioned that Animal Services operations were not authorized and therefore off the table.

The distributed reference and informational material (see also [ASAB INTERNAL PROCEDURES AND RULES](#)) was taken directly from [Resolution R-26-006](#), which, according to the Resolution's legal description, "restates and reaffirms the continue

existence, duties and operations of the ASAB." The resolution was unanimously approved by the Board of County Commissioners on Feb 17.

According to the resolution Section 3.1, only the Board of County Commissioner can restrict what the ASAB is allowed to consider. And, contrary to the administration's arbitrary new rule, in Section 3.1-E, the BoCC specifically authorizes Animal Services "operations":

- **R-26-006 Section 3.1:** "The ASAB shall have only such duties and perform such functions as required by the Board including the following":
- **And under Section 3.1-E** "Make recommendations to the Board and County Administration concerning the future funding and resource and operational options the County may consider concerning its operations as an animal control agency."

Clearly, the plain, indisputable language of ordinance R-26-006 refutes the administration's claim that the ASAB is not authorized to make recommendations concerning Animal Services' operations.

Canceled agenda items

Shortly after being appointed to the ASAB, I began submitting low-cost, solution-based, agenda-item memos to the staff liaison. Each submission was politely confirmed as received with no indication they were not authorized. In fact, on June — just 2 days prior to the first meeting — I was told "your items will be printed and included in the agenda packet." And indeed, several of my agenda memos were printed, handed out, and would have been discussed had time allowed.

Keep in mind that Animal Services Director Dr. Syna Johnson and Commissioner Krueger are there to provide expertise and insight on any individual member's proposed motion. Given their positions and the respect they command, their input would certainly carry significant weight.

More importantly, the ASAB has no power to require the county to do anything. Its role is advisory. So even if an agenda motion is approved by the ASAB, it is merely a recommendation that the county commission consider doing something, or consider directing staff to do something. The BoCC would still have to vote on whether to accept and act on the ASAB's recommendation.

Below are examples of cancelled agenda items I submitted that I felt were worthy of ASAB consideration. Each memo includes a proposed motion, background discussion and a suggested low or no-cost solution:

- Fishing line entanglement: A proposal to install inexpensive educational signs at county fishing piers and boat ramps warning that discarded line kills wildlife. (See Agenda Memo [Fishing Line Signs](#))



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- Out-of-county, no-fee adoption events: A request to discuss the risks of sending animals to free adoption events outside Manatee County, including one in Polk County, where, as the agenda memo documents, there is a history of organized dog fighting. (See Agenda Memo [Free Out of County Adoption Events](#))
- Tracking dog walks: In response to volunteer concerns that, on any given day, first walks are late (after 11am), last walks are early (before 2pm), or that not every dog gets walked at least twice, a zero-cost proposal (copied from another shelter) to save an end-of-day photo of the dog-walk boards. (See Agenda Memo [Tracking Dog Walks](#))
- A solution-based recommendation to [track denied owner surrender requests](#).
- A solution-based recommendation for a local [ordinance against discarding fish line](#) (similar to one in Miami-Dade county).
- A solution-based recommendation to [reduce off-holiday backyard fireworks](#) (similar to a strategy adopted by Orange County).

While another ASAB member validly noted that some proposals could be viewed as “too granular,” the advisory board can simply vote those down. The broader issue remains: Should the administration be allowed to determine what the advisory board can discuss? As cited above, R-26-006 says no.

Taking operations off the table allows the administration to make major-impact decisions without involving the ASAB. For example, under this rule, the board would be prohibited from discussing the transfer of animals to prefabricated housing before critical safety modifications identified by the University of Florida were completed.

Sound familiar? That is precisely what happened after the ASAB was appointed but before our first meeting.

If the administration is allowed to dictate our agenda, my fear is that 99% of our agenda will soon be limited to items asking the Board of County Commissioners for more money — more staff, better facilities, higher pay, more community services like spay/neuter and TNR. No

surprisingly, after removing 25 member-submitted ideas, the only significant motion approved on Aug. 12 was a recommendation that the BoCC reconsider funding the much needed, in my opinion, permanent shade structures at Bishop Animal Shelter.

The intent and benefit of having a citizens advisory board is to bring in new ideas on animal related issues — including policy and operations. Yet, seeing that ASAB members were proposing new ideas, this administration's response was typical of Manatee County in recent years: aggressively acting to quash speech. (See terminating this volunteer in 2020. See also terminating 11 shelter volunteers on July 3, 2023. See also pursuing felony charges against volunteers in 2026 after they posted a video). In this case, the administration fabricated a rule to achieve the same outcome — silencing speech.

Legally, the administration is wrong. Through Resolution R-26-006, the ASAB derive its authority directly from the Board of County Commissioners. As stated above, the language of the resolution authorizes the ASAB to "make recommendations concerning the future operational options the County may consider concerning its operations as an animal control agency."

The reality is that the administration has it backwards. It is they who lack authority in this matter. Nowhere in the text of the resolution does the BoCC authorize the administration to dictate, limit, or restrict what the ASAB can or cannot consider.

Commissioners can consult the county attorney, but the plain language of an ordinance must mean something. No one is above the law — that includes the court administrator. Commissioners must either formally modify the ordinance or order the immediate withdrawal of these unlawful restrictions.

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And this is how the administration acted before the new Board was even elected. It will only get worse from here on in. Marginalization, arrogance and disrespect will be the normal operating procedure towards this group.

Don't put up with their BS

Push back and question their authority

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