

Animal shelter smashed by mudslide

Just as renovation was to begin in January, flood destroyed most of the 50-year-old structure and its contents. Three animals perished as waters rose, but no dogs or cats died.

Barbara Diamond, Laguna Beach Coastline Pilot, 12-31-10

Mud cascaded through the Laguna Beach Animal Shelter on Dec. 22, wiping out the contents and severely, maybe irreparably, damaging the complex, which was scheduled for renovation in early 2011.

An assessment of the structural damage is under way, civilian shelter supervisor Jim Beres said Wednesday. Walls are still standing, but for how long or if they should be, is being evaluated.

"Right now we urgently need to get in there and do some assessment," Beres said. "A civil engineer is out there today and was out there yesterday and the day before.

"Considering what happened, it could have been worse."

All the animals except two chickens and a rabbit — which perished — were evacuated and are being cared for in the Mission Viejo shelter, Jim Beres said. The animals' return to Laguna depends on how soon the temporary shelter, to which they were to be relocated during the renovation, can be up and running.

"The animals are all safe and sound, but we would like to get them back in Laguna," said Laura Dunaway, interim shelter manager. "Right now we are in limbo."

Shelter volunteers and staff had the foresight to put stools in the kennels "just in case" before they left the shelter the day preceding the mudslide, police Lt. Jason Kravetz said Wednesday.

"The dogs were all on the stools when they came back," Kravetz said. "We will get temporary runs from Home Depot for the dogs, we hope today."

Eight dogs were safely evacuated. A rumor that two died is untrue, Beres said.

Some cats went home with volunteers, others are at Bluebelle, a nonprofit shelter for cats.

"Any new strays the police pick up will go to the shelter in Irvine," Beres said. "Pet owners may call the police department."

For information about a missing pet, owners may call (949) 497-0701, and hit 1 on the dial to bypass the recorded message.

The city's animal control program has two components: special officers and the shelter. Some shelter functions will be delayed due to the loss of equipment and records.

Ordinarily the shelter would be in the midst of preparing to renew or issue new licenses, but that has been put on hold, Beres said. He may ask the city to allow pet owners a month's grace while shelter records and files

destroyed in the mudslide are recovered from off-site storage.

Early estimates put the damage to the shelter and contents at \$800,000 and that is before a structural engineer has evaluated what, if any, of the buildings can be salvaged, Kravetz said.

"All of the contents were destroyed — the computers, the files, medicines, office equipment are a complete loss," Kravetz said. "We had to go out and buy dog food and provide petty cash — it was washed away in its lock box."

The pedestrian bridge to the facility was destroyed, but the vehicle bridge, which was examined, is usable, according to Kravetz.

Renovation of Laguna's 50-year-old shelter was scheduled to begin in January.

The City Council awarded at the Dec. 7 meeting a \$669,000 contract to Sanders Construction Services for the renovation.

During the construction, whether renovation or rebuilding, shelter operations will be in temporary quarters at 2093 Laguna Canyon Road, which was to be up and running on Jan. 7.

"We had planned a more orderly transfer," Beres said. "Now we may miss that date by a few days."

The temporary facility is smaller than the shelter, but no services will be cut back.

"Operating hours will remain the same: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days a week," Beres said.

Bluebelle Foundation had offered to keep most of the house cats for free during the renovation.

Renovations approved before the mudslide

Construction of living kennels and replacement of under-floor heating, infirmary kennels and one restroom was approved in the renovation plan, as was another restroom. Grooming, food-prep and laundry areas were to be upgraded.

Plans also called for the rear of the shelter to be enclosed, with construction to match the rest of the facility; 270 square feet to be added to enlarge the cat area and to accommodate staff and volunteers — all of which might now be moot.

The shell was to remain the same, but that is no longer an option, and the mudslide wiped out the interior, which was to be gutted.

"Some of the areas are really dilapidated," Beres said, barely more than a week before the mudslide. "The shelter has served us well, but it's time."

Proposed improvements to make the facility more energy-efficient included installing skylights that open for ventilation, reducing heat gain or loss with new windows, ceiling insulation and replacing lighting with fluorescent or LED fixtures and in-floor radiant heating instead of a boiler.

Solar panels to heat water or generate electricity were not included in the renovation because of the substantial pay-back period. However, infrastructure for future installation was to be included for the time when escalating utility costs and technological advances make the panels more cost-effective.

Construction was expected to begin in January and be completed by July 2011. That timeline may change depending upon the how salvageable the building is.