

# Competing Priorities

By Ed Boks

In many communities the care of lost and homeless animals is complicated by a host of competing priorities.

When evaluating competing priorities one's focus often turns to the bottom line. When that happens, the real questions, the questions of conscience concerning animal care can be overlooked.

In urban communities it is easy to lose touch with nature and the intrinsic value of animals. If we're not careful, we can forget that companion animals are beings with needs and wants and purpose.

When confronted with all of the issues and problems involved with creating a pleasant urban environment, it is not difficult to understand how decision makers can feel strongly that human need and wants are more important to a community than animal needs and wants.

When this happens, animal care can be reduced to a simple equation of what's affordable, profitable or expedient. We can almost fool ourselves into thinking we are dealing with widgets instead of lives.

It is at this decision point that we as a community find ourselves engaged in a true test of our character.

Indian Prime Minister Mahatma Gandhi, whose image we honor in Union Park Square in New York City, taught that the true nature of a community's character is revealed in the way that community treats their animals. In other words, animal care is a measure of a community's capacity for human empathy, compassion, and kindness.

How a community treats lost and homeless companion animals defines what that community is teaching its next generation about love, compassion and mercy.

**Matthew Scully**, senior speech writer for President Bush and author of the book *Dominion*, put it this way: "*We are called upon to treat animals with kindness, not because they have rights or power or some claim to equality, but because they don't; because they all stand unequal and powerless before us.*"

*Animals are so easily overlooked, their interests so easily brushed aside. Whenever we humans enter their world, from our farms to the local animal shelter to the African savanna, we enter as lords of the earth bearing strange powers of terror and mercy alike."*

In New York City we are on the brink of an exciting and historic accomplishment. Within a few short years we can end the terror of pet euthanasia as our sole form of pet overpopulation control.



Matthew Scully and Ed Boks  
at the White House

That is not to say there are no higher priorities or that we won't be distracted by greater needs or injustices.

To this point, Scully points out there will always be enough injustices and human suffering in the world to make the wrongs done to animals seem small and secondary. But we err in thinking of justice as a finite commodity. It is not, nor is kindness and love.

It is dangerous to think a community has just enough compassion for its elderly but not its children, or just enough love for its children but not its mentally ill.

Is it easy to think only of the value of human life? Albert Schweitzer warns that, "Anyone who has accustomed himself to regard the life of any living creature as worthless is in danger of arriving also at the idea of worthless human lives."

We compound the wrongs within our character when we excuse the wrongs done to animals by saying that more important wrongs are done to human beings and we must concentrate on those alone.

A wrong is a wrong, and when we shrug off these little wrongs we do grave harm to ourselves and others.

"When we wince at the suffering of animals, that feeling speaks well of us even when we ignore it, and those who dismiss love for our fellow creatures as mere sentimentality overlook a good and important part of our humanity." (Scully: *Dominion*)

So, how do we balance all the competing priorities vying for our attention and resources?

The great philosopher Yogi Berra provided the answer when he said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

When we come to competing priorities such as summer youth programs or animal care, let's take it as an opportunity to implement a **Teach Love and Compassion** (TLC) program that meets the needs of both our kids and our pets.

TLC is just one example of how we as a community can walk and chew gum at the same time. Choosing priorities need not be either/or it can be both. One part of our community need not suffer because we feel we have to choose another constituency.

Animal control can implement programs designed to address the needs of our community. Big Fix, FELIX, STAR, Safety Net are a few examples of the role animal care can play in displaying the type of character we would want to see replicated in our children.

What is exciting about these types of animal control programs is that they truly exemplify the character of our community. They exist because of the love and compassion of people who care about the entire circle of life in our communities, a circle that includes our pets.