

THE GILROY
DISPATCH

Shelter sees increase in abandoned horses

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By Katie Helland (editor@garlic.com)

The cream-colored Azteca stallion with a black mane and tail closes his eyes and licks the hand of the shelter supervisor as she pets his face. Just a few weeks earlier, the horse was left alone, tied to a post in front of a ranch.

The neighbors didn't recognize him so they called the San Martin Animal Shelter off Murphy Avenue. Shelter Supervisor Brigid Wasson suspected the horse was abandoned at the ranch with the hopes that someone would adopt him. He is one of two horses currently up for adoption at the shelter - the other is in a foster home - and represents a new trend in animal abandonment due to the downward economy.

"People don't realize horses are just as overpopulated as cats," Wasson said.

While one or two horses used to be brought into the shelter each year, the shelter now receives one or two horses each month. Horse owners lose their job or are down to one income and can't afford to keep their horses, Wasson said.

"It's not just happening at the animal shelter," said Rhonda Heiner, who is a horse trainer at Big Oak Ranch in Morgan Hill.

"The commitment to owning a horse is basically like having a kid. You are 100 percent responsible for their food and care," she said.

Hay to feed a horse can cost between \$9 to \$15 each month, Wasson said, and grain supplements can run \$50 to \$60 each month, Heiner said. Shoes must be replaced every six weeks at a cost of about \$130, said Heiner.

In addition, horses take a lot of time - owners need to clean stalls and pick out manure from the horse's feet daily to prevent fungus and expensive vet visits, Heiner said. Horses also need to be let out of the stalls to exercise and should be brushed and cleaned regularly.

Many boarders at the ranch where Heiner works are being affected, including the owner of a Reserve World Champion Horse, who abandoned the horse at the stables. When this happened - as it did with another horse this year - the ranch owner had to assume the cost or find the horse a new home.

"It's very hard - especially if you like horses," she said.

Heiner, who charges \$40 per lesson, has also felt the financial burden. She used to train 24 horses - now she trains 14.

"It's basically almost cut in half," she said. "Horses are a luxury item."

And the shelter isn't in any position to take in more, Wasson said.

"We unfortunately can't take owner surrenders right now because we have limited facilities," she said.

Those limited facilities are two metal piped corrals behind the shelter. The larger corral is big enough to hold two horses, while the smaller corral can only hold one horse, but has an overhang for bad weather.

"We've had as many as three here at a time," Wasson said. "That's tough because if we have stallions, they want to fight."



Kennel attendant Randy Gillmore feeds a stallion alfalfa at the San Martin Animal Shelter Tuesday afternoon. The horse, who is in his mid to late teens, was found left in a field at the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and Bolsa Road in Gilroy July 2.
Photo by: Lora Schraft, Staff Photographer

The shelter recently received donations that will allow them to make their corrals stronger and to separate more horses from each other. The shelter will also build an overhang for the larger corral.

The horses that come to the shelter often come with an expensive problem, such as an illness. Stallions, like the Azteca - known to the shelter staff simply as Aztec - at the shelter, can be difficult to handle and at least \$600 to castrate. The shelter has posted a request on Craigslist.com for hay donations.

Local residents donated 10 bales of hay, but if more horses arrive at the shelter, this won't be enough. Local hay distributors are also responding to the call for help.

Horses are not the only animals flowing into the shelter. Last week, the shelter took in two goats and three sheep in its back corrals. Hard economic times are increasing the number of pets being surrendered and abandoned, Wasson said.

Yet, adoption rates are steady, she said. And while that's not ideal, it's a good sign that adoptions are not decreasing with the downward economy.

"I think people are realizing what a good deal it is here," she said.

Despite the increased workload, Wasson does not hold enmity toward those who surrender their pets. She offered as an example a 70-year-old man, who had to give up his pet earlier this week because he was living on \$800 monthly Social Security payments.

"You just feel for the people," Wasson said.

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