

SPECIALTY PLATE

Continued From Page 1

to help pay for free and low-cost spay and neuter programs.

The plates share similar designs, a beach scene with cartoon drawings of a dog and cat on the left.

Many people find the competing efforts confusing, said Cindy Hewitt, executive director of The Cat Network, a Miami-based group that works to reduce cat overpopulation in South Florida.

"A lot of people in the community feel very strongly that having a consolidated effort would give us a greater chance of success," said Hewitt, who is trying to bring the groups back together. "The general public isn't going to understand the subtleties of this."

'Decision That Could Sabotage'

The Voices for Animals activists, Jim Gisondi and Shelagh Inglesby, played key roles for the coalition. They designed the original plate and traveled the state to drum up support and contributions.

Gisondi, of St. Petersburg, is the executive director of Plate for Paws, which incorporated in Florida as a nonprofit organization Oct. 3. He is a lifelong animal rights activist and Voices for Animals board member who testified in May against the state's new policy prohibiting the practice of trapping, neutering and returning feral cats to the wild.

Gisondi said he and Inglesby, his girlfriend and the Plate for Paws education coordinator, got the idea for a pet plate while buying a "Save the Manatee" tag last year.

The couple controlled about \$53,000 and 14,000 surveys when they left the coalition, said Leslie Mann of Davie, coordinator of the Florida Animal Friend campaign.

"They lost my trust and they lost my respect," said Mann, a former animal-cruelty investigator and a 20-year animal rescue veteran. "When you have a coalition, you don't just make unilateral decisions like this — a decision that could sabotage the entire effort."

Both Mann and Gisondi are passionate animal rights crusaders. She shares her Fort Lauderdale area home with



Tribune photo by MARK GUSS

The original plate, now being used by the Plate for Paws campaign, was designed by Jim Gisondi and his girlfriend, Shelagh Inglesby. They kept the design after breaking from the coalition.

more than 15 adopted dogs and cats, many of them formerly abused and neglected. Gisondi and Inglesby own four dogs and two cats they saved from being euthanized.

Gisondi insists he had no choice but to leave the coalition. He said the contributing nonprofit animal welfare groups threatened to pull their support if they did not receive more representation on the panel that would dole out grants for spay and neuter programs in the state.

"They were worried they weren't going to be able to receive a grant when they found out this looked like it was going to be a governmental-driven grant committee," he said. "When I told [Rep. Rich] the groups were pulling out, she voluntarily stepped down as sponsoring our organization. And this is where we are now."

Rich, who is supporting the Animal Friend campaign, rebutted Gisondi's version of events.

She said Gisondi wanted Voices for Animals, whose 2002 tax return shows a \$46,561 operating deficit, to be the sole decision-maker over the distribution of grants.

"They wanted to eliminate a number of the partners sitting at the table," she said. "I couldn't sponsor their version of the license plate that would eliminate these other partners. They are important players in this very unfortunate problem of pet overpopulation."

Each year, about 800,000 unwanted dogs and cats are killed in Florida shelters.

A draft of Rich's bill says the



Florida Animal Friend

The larger coalition's campaign, Florida Animal Friend, developed a plate design similar to the original after the split.

grant council would include members of the Humane Society, the state's veterinary medical and animal control associations, a nonprofit group, and an at-large member.

Funding would go to nonprofit groups and governmental agencies with spay and neuter programs. Proceeds also could be used for "other emergency animal welfare protection concerns" by a unanimous vote of the council.

"I have a commitment from the people I need to have a commitment from that they will move my bill forward," Rich said.

Race For Legislature

Gisondi said Plate for Paws also has legislative sponsors and a lobbyist. He refused to identify them to keep them "out of the mess."

Gisondi would not provide a copy of his bill's draft text. Nor would he reveal who would serve on his group's grant committee other than him and possibly Inglesby.

Mann, the Animal Friend coordinator, said Gisondi

should have brought his concerns to the coalition rather than to Rich.

"There would have been any number of things we could do," she said. "And maybe we still can."

As of last week, Gisondi said Plate for Paws needed 7,500 more surveys and \$26,000 in contributions by Dec. 1. Mann was unsure how many surveys or how much cash Florida Animal Friend has collected since starting over from "ground zero" six weeks ago.

The competition between the campaigns, coupled with the expectation that lawmakers will try to curb proliferating specialty plates during the 2004 session, could doom both groups' efforts.

"This may be Florida's only chance to have a spay and neuter plate, and it may have been missed," said Laura Bevan, the Southeast regional director for the Humane Society of the United States. "And that will be a shame."

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