

Our Companions animal sanctuary slated to begin construction this summer

By [Lauri Voter - Staff Writer](#)
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Our Companions CEO Susan B. Linker plays with 'Laura,' an FIV-positive cat that is up for adoption. Photo by Lauri Voter.

Our Companions, a non-profit animal protection organization, started its operation in 2002.

“The reason we created the organization is because we were given 43 acres of land in Ashford,” said Our Companions CEO Susan B. Linker, who explained that the land that was donated was once an industrial egg farm on beautiful land that includes a 7-acre pond.

According to Linker, the industrial-sized buildings, which no longer exist, were huge and housed approximately 100,000 laying hens, stacked up in cages.

“It’s a cool little irony that this place where hundreds of thousands of animals suffered is going to be a sanctuary for animals,” said Linker.

Since 2002, Our Companions has been raising funds to build its animal sanctuary on the Ashford property. With a goal of \$920,000 to begin Phase I of the project, the group has collected \$830,000 from its network of 2,500 individual donors. Linker said that this amount is “enough to move forward,” and that there are a few pending proposals from additional funders that will help the group reach its \$920,000 goal.

“Unlike universities or hospitals that have other sources of revenue, with rescue operations, it’s 100 percent from the public,” said Linker.

Linker said that Ashford Planning and Zoning approved the project on April 11 <http://www.ashfordtownhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/PZC-041111.pdf> . Now, Our Companions is awaiting its first permit. It hopes to receive that septic permit in May, break ground in June or July, build through the summer, and have its first building up and running by fall of 2011.

Our Companions animal sanctuary in Ashford will provide a nurturing environment for animals that are particularly difficult to place in “forever homes,” due to illness or behavioral issues.

Initially, the group will build one model cottage with two floors – with dogs on one level and cats on the other – and use that experiment cottage to perfect the process before continuing to build the remaining cottages. Ultimately, there will be eight cottages for dogs and eight cottages for cats, with cottages being built in stages, as money and processes allow.

Rather than a shelter environment, the cottages themselves will resemble a domestic environment, complete with sights and sounds that will be found in an actual residence, such as a living room, kitchen, a dishwasher and doorbell. The dogs and cats will roam freely, therefore animals accepted into the sanctuary must be able to live with other animals.

The sanctuary will be private, and therefore not an open-door shelter, although people will be able to make appointments to see the animals.

“This is a place where animals that have come to heal are healing. The purpose is to be able to take in animals that have treatable conditions, that are going to be destroyed in shelters. For example, a diabetic cat goes into a shelter... they take longer to adopt. In many cases, you don’t want a diabetic cat in a shelter, it’s just the worst environment,” explained Linker, who said that stress and disease in shelter environments can be detrimental to already-distressed animals.

“These are animals that really need some special care. They’re not un-adoptable, but they just need the right organization with the right mission and the right commitment to be ‘no kill’ and that can provide the right environment,” explained Linker.

“For the purpose of dogs, it would be to recreate a home environment,” Linker said, saying that shelter environments do not bring out the best in dogs and do not serve to bring out their true behaviors.

“The sanctuary will save a lot of animals, but our mission is a lot larger than that,” said Linker.

Our Companions also conducts human education programs, as well as trap, neuter, return (TNR) - or feral cat work. “There are hundreds of thousands of them out there,” said Linker. In addition, the group has several volunteers who go to people's homes to help train troubled dogs. This “canine college” program has helped several dogs remain in their homes.

“I think there is this historical mentality that when you’re done with your animal, or when you find an animal, you’re rescue obligation is to bring it to a shelter... We have to change that shift and not just place the entire burden of everyone’s animals on the shelters, and have people take

some personal responsibility for their own pets,” said Linker, who also said that some people do not realize that animals are still being destroyed in shelters. Once people understand the implications of sending their animal to a shelter, most want to do the right thing for the animal.

Our Companions just received a two-year grant from PetSmart Charities for a town-wide project whereby residents of Ashford can have any outdoor cat(s) sterilized and vaccinated for free <http://www.petsmartcharities.org/grants/awarded/2009/our-companions-dome...>

“It’s the first project in the country that takes an entire town and tries to statistically prove the impact of TNR on outdoor cats, and Ashford has a lot of free roaming cats. The goal is to use it as a piece of research on a national level to show that TNR can work to reduce the cat population in a town,” said Linker. She hopes that the data collected from this pilot project will help drive a similar state initiative.

“The town of Ashford has been really great to work with. We have a lot of animal-lovers there,” said Linker.

Eventually, the group plans to look for a public location, or storefront-type location to serve as a program center that is open to the public and where training programs and adoption events can be held. Our Companions can be reached at 860-242-9999, or by visiting <http://www.ourcompanions.org>.