

If Mayor Glen Murray can't even run a dog pound,
what makes him think he can run a city?

The Winnipeg Civic Election & Selling Lost Pet Dogs to Researchers

by Stephen Best

“I’d like to thank some new friends from Ontario, Liz White and Steve Best from Animal Alliance of Canada and Environment Voters,” says Mark Lubosch, the just re-elected, 38 year old Winnipeg City Councillor. It’s 9:12pm on October 23rd at Mark Lubosch’s Campaign Headquarters in North Kildonan Ward. The polls have been closed since 8:00pm. Mark Lubosch is relieved and grateful, and, for the first time in over a month, relaxed. A 100-strong, happy crowd of campaign workers, friends, and relatives surrounds him. Behind Lubosch, on the poll-by-poll tally board, vivid red rings circle “74.1%!” An explosion of orange exclamation marks punctuates this astonishing percentage of voter support — support, Lubosch has earned.

Lubosch is remembering each person who helped secure tonight’s overwhelming re-election victory. He continues, “Animal Alliance and Environment Voters have been helping us with radio ads, telephone canvassing, and Liz and Steve were even here today to help us get out the vote.

“We’re working together to stop the Winnipeg pound from selling lost pet dogs to researchers at the University of Manitoba. Liz? Is Liz here? Liz? Has Liz left? Well, perhaps she’s stepped out for a minute. I’d also like to thank ... ,” and Lubosch moves on to others.

Liz is, in fact, in the room, but she’s crouching behind a metre-high stack of greasy pizza boxes and empty soft drink cans — the nutritional fuel of too many election campaigns. She’s hasn’t heard Lubosch’s thanks because her ear is pressed to the left speaker of a black boom box, tuned to CJOB, Winnipeg’s news and talk radio station. Thanks to weeks of Animal Alliance and Environment Voters’ telephone canvassing and voter polling, Liz White knew that Lubosch would win tonight. Her concern now is with the other three Winnipeg City Councillors that AAC and EV campaigned for: Harvey Smith, Harry Lazarenko, and Mike O’Shaughnessy. How they fare this election night will play a decisive part in Winnipeg City Council’s decision on the fate of its contract to sell lost pet dogs from the Winnipeg pound to researchers at the University of Manitoba. Harry Lazarenko and Harvey Smith have promised to put the matter before the full Council, and Mike O’Shaughnessy, who sits on the powerful Executive Policy Committee, has pledged his support. But, all three are in tight races. Local pundits have slated them for possible defeat. Each is being confronted by a well-funded, popular challenger, some of whom — so the rumor goes — were hand-picked by Mayor Glen Murray, who is hoping that the voters will rid him of Smith and Lazarenko: two of the Mayor’s most principled critics.

As the radio station slowly releases the poll results, the names in the winner columns oscillate between incumbent and challenger. Mercifully, by 10:33pm it's over. The decision desks at the radio and television stations declare elected all of the candidates AAC and EV supported. Within minutes, a relieved Liz White telephones Smith, Lazarenko, and O'Shaughnessy, and congratulates them. Their responses are heartfelt, even tearful. The AAC/EV campaigns may have made the difference between them winning or losing. Each of the re-elected Councillors — true to his word — reiterates his determination to rid Winnipeg of the despicable practice of selling lost pet dogs to research.

The next day Harvey Smith and his Special Assistant, Joe Chan, meet Liz at the Winnipeg airport for a lunch meeting before her flight home to Toronto. Over too many cups of coffee and echoing airport announcements, Liz, Smith, and Chan develop a political and public relations strategy that they're confident will push a resolution through City Council — before the new year — to invoke the termination clause in Winnipeg's contract to sell lost pet dogs to University of Manitoba researchers.

As the meeting with Harvey and Joe is wrapping up, Liz takes a cell phone call from Barb Groberman, a tireless, Winnipeg AAC supporter and champion of the animals. Barb has wrested a firm commitment from another City Councillor, Garth Steek, to vote to terminate the City's contract with the University of Manitoba.

What a difference an election makes. What a difference a generously-funded, highly professional, winning election campaign makes. For over two years, AAC Directors Liz White and Jacqui Barnes — with the help of many volunteers and supporters — had been trying to persuade Winnipeg's Mayor and City Councillors to end their contract to sell lost pet dogs to researchers at the University of Manitoba. With a few notable exceptions, "disregard," "disdain," and "contempt" describe how Winnipeg city politicians treated Liz and Jacqui's efforts to help their city's pet dogs and the families whose homes they share.

But, AAC/EV's election campaign and the grassroots uprising from AAC's supporters — particularly those in Winnipeg — changed the Winnipeg politicians' manners. Like a Red River flood, telephone calls, faxes, e-mails, and letters from AAC's supporters deluged the Mayor and Councillors, and this radio spot began to run on CJOB, the most influential news and talk radio station in Winnipeg:

A message from Animal Alliance of Canada.

Do you deserve a mayor who can't even run a dog pound?

In Calgary, over 97% of the dogs the pound rescues are either returned to their owners or adopted.

In Winnipeg, our pound kills over a third of the family dogs it catches.

In Calgary, as in most progressive cities, peoples' lost dogs are never sold to researchers.

In Winnipeg, our pound can catch your family dog and within a week sell him or her to researchers for use in sometimes cruel experiments.

In Calgary, the pound doesn't cost taxpayers a cent. Dog licensing pays for everything.

In Winnipeg, taxpayers pay over one million dollars a year to run our pound.

For over a year, we've been trying to show Mayor Glen Murray how he can protect family dogs, help pet owners, and lower taxes, but he refuses to meet with us.

If Mayor Glen Murray can't even run a dog pound, what makes him think he can run a city?

AAC made a strategic decision not to actively campaign against Mayor Murray. Despite Murray's disappointing record, it would have been futile, and a waste of supporters' contributions. Murray's only serious challenger was an ex-Councillor who was forced to resign after a tax evasion conviction. However, AAC's radio spot did become the talk of the town, and made Mayor Glen Murray a punch line. Newspaper columnists wrote about it, and cabbies joked about it. It also served its purpose by showing Murray (who has federal ambitions) and other Winnipeg politicians what an Animal Alliance/Environment Voters negative election campaign could look and feel like. The practical result? Winnipeg's politicians began returning Liz's calls to discuss Winnipeg selling lost pet dogs to research.

Meanwhile, back at the Animal Alliance office in Toronto, Jacqui Barnes was managing the AAC/EV election telephone bank. Every night Jacqui and her volunteers called Winnipeg voters in key, swing polls to help elect the four Councillors who had publicly promised (in writing) to help AAC. In the last 10 days of the election, with Jacqui's team relentlessly working the phones, Environment Voters' radio spots began airing on both CJOB and 99.9 BOB FM — a soft rock, "oldies" radio station which "skews to an older demographic," as they say in the radio biz. BOB FM was EV's station of choice for this election campaign, because people over 40 tend to vote more consistently and at a higher rate, particularly in municipal elections, than younger people.

By all electoral measures, the Animal Alliance / Environment Voters civic election campaign in Winnipeg was a success. But, there was a sobering incident on the day before election day, when Liz was canvassing door-to-door in one of the poorest polls in Harvey Smith's Daniel McIntyre Ward. It underscored not only why AAC and EV were working so hard to get good politicians re-elected, but also the fact that winning elections is just a means to achieving AAC's real goal: improving the lives of animals. Liz found a lost puppy — a hound cross, tan colored, about 2 months old, friendly and happy as a warm kitten. The pup had no tags, just a worn black nylon collar. Liz knocked on doors up and down the street, talked to dozens of neighbours, but no one recognized the pup. Finally, Liz called a cab and took the pup to the Winnipeg Humane Society.

Liz knew she couldn't take her new friend to the Winnipeg pound, because just two days before, while concluding the preparations for a press conference, she had finished analyzing over 800 individual records of lost pet dogs that the Winnipeg pound had sold to the University of Manitoba since 19___. (The pound had been forced to give Liz the records because of Animal Alliance's Freedom of Information action.) What those documents revealed was that the pup that nestled in Liz's arms during the cab ride to the Winnipeg Humane Society, and gnawed Liz's glove into mush, was exactly the kind of lost pet that the researchers at the University of Manitoba wanted, and that the pound was selling to them — usually in less than 9 days after the dogs were caught by the pound. The pound was selling the most easily adoptable dogs. The gentle staff at the Winnipeg Humane Society welcomed their new charge with love and affection, and, unlike the pound, with hope. Liz, knowing the pup would be safe, returned to Daniel McIntyre Ward, and went back to knocking on doors and asking people to vote for Harvey Smith.

Animal Alliance and Environment Voters' successful election campaign in Winnipeg is not the end of the campaign to stop Winnipeg selling lost pets to researchers. Although it looks very hopeful that the politicians will terminate the contract. Animal Alliance has not eased the pressure on them. Every effort is being made to end the Winnipeg pound's heinous treatment of lost pet dogs.

A consequence of AAC and EV's campaign is that local groups and individuals are stepping forward to help. The Winnipeg Humane Society has joined the campaign. A local business man, Jim Gauthier, was featured on the front page of the Winnipeg Sun. Gauthier is funding the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter to buy all the dogs that the pound plans to sell to researchers, and find new homes for them. As of the writing of this article, the Winnipeg pound has yet to respond to the life-saving offer. And, the local press has taken up the animals' cause, making how Winnipeg politicians neglect lost pet dogs and their guardians, a city-wide story.

As for the lost pup Liz rescued, the pup's guardian found her the same day. She also bought a licence and a name tag for her animal friend, and booked an appointment with the Winnipeg Humane Society to have her spayed.

Published in *Taking Action*, Animal Alliance of Canada, 2002