

Trish Doyle MP

Member for Blue Mountains

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The topic of my private member's statement today might be a little uncomfortable for some. I will be speaking unfavourably about a well-known charity: the RSPCA. In July the RSPCA announced it would be closing the Blue Mountains shelter, citing a "decline in demand" as its primary reason for this decision. The RSPCA's CEO was quoted in the local media as saying that our community "displays an unwavering commitment to positive pet guardianship" and that we "prioritise the wellbeing" of our pets, which has led to a significant decrease of the number of animals coming into the Blue Mountains shelter. I would really love to believe that. I have such faith in the good people of my community, but these statements by the RSPCA are challenged by those same good people in my community. The story they tell is something altogether different.

The story that other animal shelters in neighbouring electorates tell is that they are struggling under the weight of abandoned and rescued animals, yet somehow miraculously the RSPCA is essentially claiming that the shelter in Katoomba is no longer needed. My community is amazing. However, I do not think we have set an exemplar of animal welfare standards that surpasses those of other animal-loving communities. Something in this narrative just does not add up. The history of the Blue Mountains animal shelter is unique. It commenced operations in 1981, largely due to the unwavering determination of a local woman, Silvia Ford. Silvia joined the RSPCA in 1976, becoming a life governing member of the Blue Mountains branch and president of that branch in the same year. According to Silvia, whilst the RSPCA discouraged the setup of a facility in Katoomba, she remained resolute in her belief that it was desperately needed in the Blue Mountains. A shelter committee was formed and an animal shelter fund was launched, with local community support growing for Silvia's vision.

In 1977 the committee rented its first shop in Blaxland, with more shops to follow in other villages, the profits from which enabled the committee in 1980 to purchase land in Mort Street, Katoomba, to build a shelter. Once it was built, Silvia was appointed as the shelter administrator and managed the facility for 22 years. I have heard from Silvia and others who have been involved with the RSPCA locally that in 2002 when Silvia retired, the Blue Mountains shelter was self-financing and described as a model shelter. I want to know what happened between then and now for one of this State's most recognised charities to come to the decision to close its doors to a shelter that I hear time and again is desperately needed, despite claims by the RSPCA that it is not.

There is a lot more to the history of the Blue Mountains animal shelter but unfortunately I do not have the time to go into complexities, and it is incredibly complex. Many of those involved with the RSPCA locally have expressed anger and dismay over what they believe are the actions of a charity with a changing model that cares less about grassroots animal welfare and providing shelter, and more about running a profit-making corporate machine aimed at boosting the profiles of senior management. My community acknowledges those within the RSPCA who are hardworking, compassionate and there for the right reasons, but the overall feeling is that locally we have got a pretty raw deal. A shelter that was set up and funded by community efforts, and by all reports financially independent until relatively recent times, is now being closed. Locals do not believe the spin that is being fed to us from those at the top.

My community's perspective is that a declining trust in the RSPCA has been fuelled by what they describe as a deliberate and deceitful winding up of operations at the Blue Mountains shelter. Some local branch members, including Silvia Ford, have had their memberships revoked, with Silvia in particular being investigated for allegations relating to potential breaches of RSPCA policy. Loosely translated, I think that means she expressed her profound dissatisfaction and disappointment with a charity that she has selflessly dedicated so many years of her life to. It is worrisome to think that this era of heartfelt free speech can be the catalyst for such a drastic response. I would like to see the history of our shelter recognised and acknowledged, along with the unwavering advocacy of the incredible Save Our Shelter community group.

I would also like to see a reason for even a little of my community's faith to be restored in a charity that has received millions and millions of dollars in recent years from government and community donations, yet cannot extend itself to continuing to support our local, much-needed shelter. Earlier this year after meeting with the RSPCA executive and our mayor, our local council was assured of an agreement that would enable them to continue using the shelter as a pound facility up until 2029, but the RSPCA has walked away from that deal leaving our council with that immense burden. Shame!