

Concerns Over Sheriff's Ability to Protect Animals Delays Talks of Shelter Transfer

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[Candidate for Sheriff Joe Puglia](#)

BROOKSVILLE – The Hernando Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) was scheduled to discuss a proposed transfer of Animal Services to Sheriff Al Nienhuis this Tuesday, but after news broke of Nienhuis possibly ignoring calls to shut down an **illegal slaughterhouse**, the item was pulled from the agenda.



[Sheriff Al Nienhuis](#)

Chairwoman Beth Narverud and Nienhuis have been working on the plan for several months, despite speculation that their motives were not in the best interest of the county. Some say Nienhuis is out for revenge against Shelter Director James Terry, who blew the whistle on Nienhuis when he was third in command at the Sheriff's Office. Terry filed complaints against Nienhuis in 2017 alleging that his boss was hiding \$2.2 million in federal inmate housing funds from the BOCC.

Terry then ran against Nienhuis for Sheriff in the 2020 election, which many say poured salt on the wound.



Animal Services Director James Terry

Setting the stage for the takeover, Narverud blasted Terry last November over allegations that one of his staff euthanized a dog using the "**Heartstick**" method. Those claims turned out to be false, but they drew the attention of animal rights activists who launched their own attacks against Terry. With the community questioning Terry's ability to keep animals safe, selling the takeover to their constituents would have been much easier – but last week's development may have foiled their plan.



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[Commissioner Narverud with State Senator Blaise Ingoglia](#)

The pair drew criticism last March after they flew to Brevard County in Nienhuis' [private aircraft](#). An aviation expert told R News that the charter was in violation of FAA rules because the charter was technically County business which may have required Nienhuis to possess an additional certification. Nienhuis says he did nothing wrong. Narverud declined to comment.



['Funny Biz' the Racehorse Slaughtered in Brooksville](#)

Last Tuesday, news broke of an illegal slaughterhouse operating next to an elementary school where countless livestock, including a racehorse named 'Funny Biz,' were inhumanely slaughtered, butchered, and sold on the black market. Last November, animal rights investigator Richard Couto presented evidence of numerous crimes being committed by the operators of the business, but Nienhuis refused to take action. That sparked a firestorm of criticism aimed at Nienhuis.

During a press conference last Wednesday, Nienhuis turned the tables on Couto, stating he was "difficult" and blamed him for the deaths of '**Funny Biz**' and other animals. Nienhuis' accusations threw fuel on the fire and further incensed the community, which prompted a demonstration at the property on Sunday.

During an interview, **property owner Bill Maddox** told R News that the men who ran the operation, Juan Ortiz and his son Juan Ortiz Jr had already fled the area. Maddox also revealed that he's been trying to bring attention to authorities for two years, but the Sheriff's Office took no action. If that is true, Nienhuis allowed the barbaric slaughter of countless animals to continue from 2022 until the owners packed up and left the area last week. Nienhuis refused to discuss the details of his investigation but told reporters that it's been turned over to the State Attorney's Office for review.

With the possibility that angry citizens and activists might attend this Tuesday's BOCC meeting to demand answers and reject the shelter transfer, Narverud pulled the item off the agenda. Both Nienhuis and Narverud are up for reelection during the Primary on August 20, and many say the slaughterhouse debacle may have sealed the deal for Narverud's opponent Ryan Amsler, and Nienhuis' opponent Joe Puglia.



Commissioner Candidate Ryan Amsler

Amsler tells R News, "Hearing news that Narverud dropped the agenda item from tomorrow's BOCC meeting, days after the slaughterhouse story broke is deeply troubling. If my opponent really cared about the safety and security of animals, she would address her concerns publicly and be transparent about why she removed the discussion from the agenda. Transparency is lacking in this county and it's one reason I decided to join the race."



[Candidate for Sheriff Joe Puglia](#)

Puglia chimed in on Narverud's sudden decision, stating, "This is a very sad decision on many levels. I understand the passion that drives animal lovers, as my family and I are as well, but we must pause a

moment and let things cool down because these little guys depend on us for safety and survival." Puglia continues, "I know for sure that the Sheriff does not have the resources or the expertise at this time to commit to running the shelter, which has become evident in the failures of his current responsibilities. Crime is on the rise and public safety is in question and he clearly needs to focus on those issues before anything else."



Candidate for Commissioner Marvin Baynham

Candidate for District 3 Commissioner Marvin Baynham says, "As a public servant, I strongly believe in prioritizing the interest of our citizens. How could the acquisition of the shelter affect the sheriff's budget and general fund? It's important to set aside political agendas and focus on what truly matters. Our community has a deep passion

for animal welfare, and while it's an election year, we must make difficult decisions. Let's do what's best for the people of Hernando County." Baynham is running against the embattled incumbent John Allocco, who has come under fire for flip-flopping on his promise to serve two terms and not raise taxes.



Commissioner Steve Champion



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Champion says, "I think our Sheriff's Deputies do a great job, but the Sheriff's Office needs to focus on fighting crime. We've received a flood of emails from nonprofit officials who say they do not want Sheriff Nienhuis to take over control of the shelter. The County is more than capable and well-equipped to care for the animals." Champion goes on to explain that for the past five years, Animal Services has saved over 90% of the animals at the shelter, which according to the national standard, qualifies it as a "no-kill" shelter. The shelter is coming up on its sixth qualifying year as a "no-kill" year under Terry's leadership.

Neither Sheriff Nienhuis nor Commissioner Narverud responded to our requests for comment.