WASHOE COUNTY



FEE RESTRUCTURING CASE STUDY

How Washoe County Regional Animal Services achieved financial sustainability and community impact through strategic fee modernization.

DocuPet®

2025

BACKGROUND

Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS) serves as the primary animal welfare authority for Reno, Sparks, and unincorporated Washoe County, Nevada. Since regionalization in 2005, the agency's licensing and service fees had remained largely unchanged for over two decades. By 2023, the program faced mounting financial pressure. Cost recovery levels had fallen to 42%, leaving 58% of expenditures subsidized by the county's general fund.

Recognizing the need for long-term sustainability, WCRAS initiated its first comprehensive Cost of Services Study in more than 20 years, partnering with MGT Consulting to assess the true cost of service delivery, evaluate peer comparisons, and develop a modernized fee structure.



THE CHALLENGE

Before the study, Washoe County's fees were substantially below market rates:

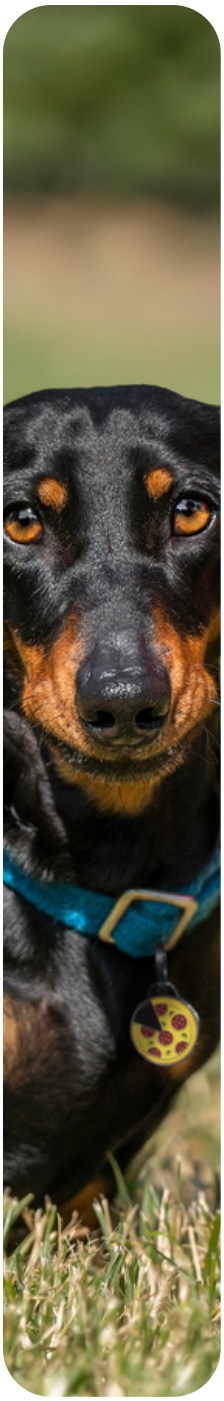
$8	$20	$8
Altered Dog License	**Unaltered Dog License**	**Senior Rate** (regardless of alteration status)

**per year*

These low fees limited cost recovery, constrained community programs, and failed to reflect the real operational cost of field services, licensing administration, and shelter care. Compounding the issue, WCRAS had also been performing services such as permits and quarantines without any associated fees, creating further imbalance.

The combination of outdated rates, unbilled services, and increasing community demand, made reform both a fiscal and strategic imperative.

WORKING WITH DOCUPET



DocuPet played a pivotal role in supporting Washoe County's decision to pursue a pet licensing fee increase and program restructuring. Since the program's launch in August 2022, DocuPet has conducted four comprehensive program reviews, three of which identified that Washoe County's licensing fees were significantly lower than typical rates across the country, highlighting a key area of potential growth.

The team further addressed the County's primary concern that raising fees might reduce compliance, by sharing evidence from national trends showing little to no correlation between price and compliance when the program's value is effectively communicated to pet owners. Additionally, DocuPet provided early revenue performance data and comparative benchmarks that helped the County assess the financial and operational impacts of a potential fee change.

These insights not only validated the need for restructuring but also framed the initiative as a strategic necessity rather than a risk. Ultimately, DocuPet's consultative approach and contextual expertise reinforced Washoe County's confidence in national best practices, and a focus on community value.

DEVELOPING THE STUDY

Initiation and Vendor Selection

WCRAS Director Shyanne Schull began advocating for a fee study soon after joining the department more than a decade ago, but political sensitivity and the COVID-19 pandemic delayed progress.

In 2023, the agency secured approval to contract with MGT Consulting, a Nevada-based firm experienced with sheltering and animal services fee analysis. The study cost approximately $12,000 and was completed within six months — an efficient turnaround given the complexity of time studies, overhead allocation, and comparative analysis.

Methodology

MGT's "bottom-up" approach involved:

1. Time studies across all service areas (licensing, impounds, permits, field calls, etc.).
2. Calculation of productive hourly rates (using 1,800 annual productive hours per FTE).
3. Inclusion of departmental and centralized overhead costs.
4. Annualization of activity volumes to estimate total cost and projected revenues.
5. Recommendations for full-cost and policy based recovery target.

Staff Inclusion and Transparency

One key to success was staff engagement. Every team member, from field officers to front-desk clerks, contributed data on how long tasks actually took. This process deepened internal understanding of workload distribution, improved morale, and prepared staff to explain the rationale behind fee changes to the public.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

$2.45 *Million*

Total
fee-related costs

$1.04 *Million*

Current revenue
(42% recovery)

89%

Recommended
cost recovery

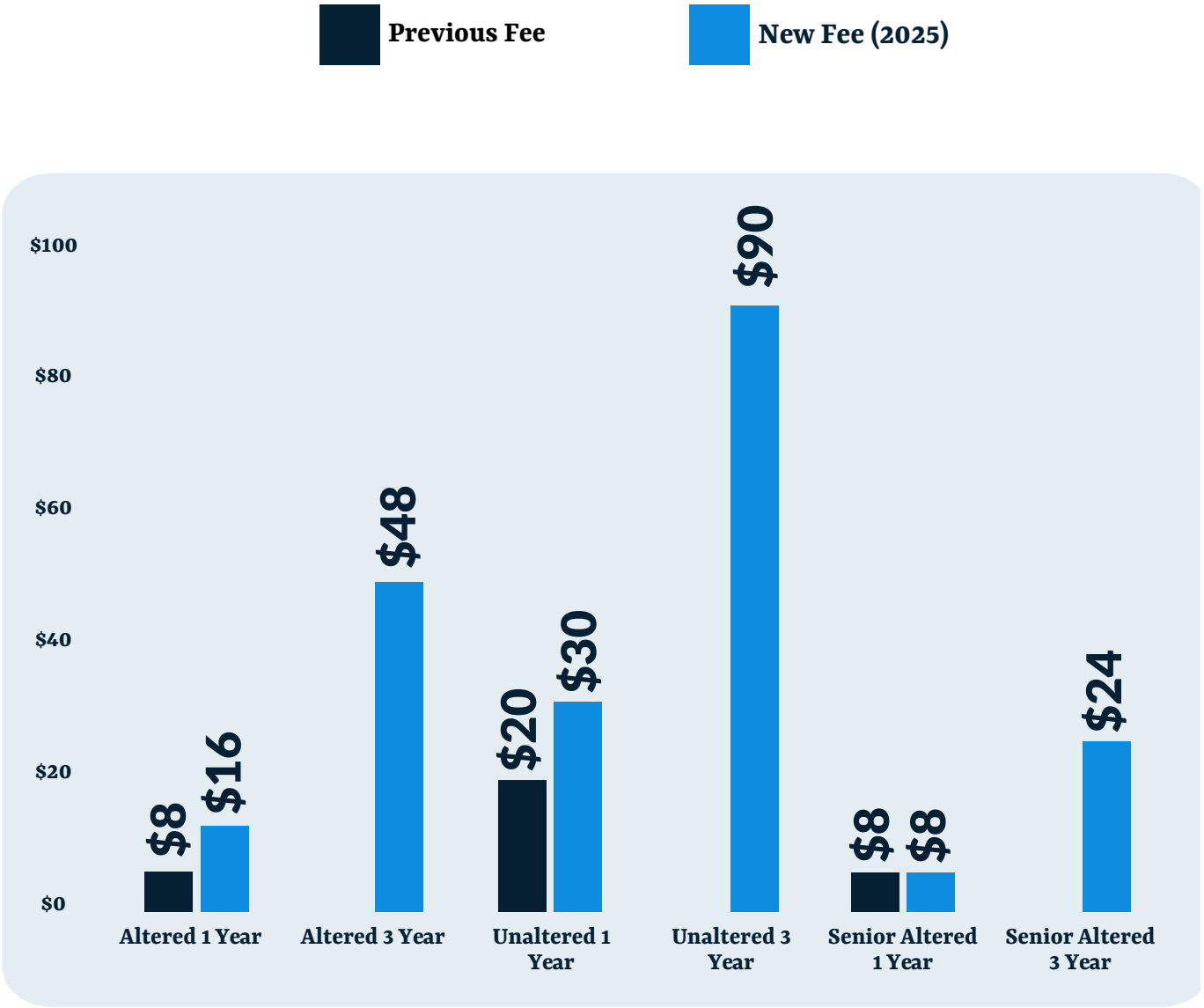
Producing an estimated *$1.15 Million* in new annual revenue

To achieve this, MGT proposed:

- Increasing 23 existing fees, removing or replacing outdated fees, and adding 16 new fees.
- Introducing 3-year license options for altered, unaltered, and senior dogs.
- Implementing new permits and medical service fees (e.g., Dangerous Dog, Commercial Animal Welfare, Veterinary Exams).
- Instituting spay/neuter incentives by dedicating a portion of unaltered license revenue to a community veterinary fund.
- Adopting an annual CPI or COLA adjustment to prevent future lag in cost recovery.

NEW FEE STRUCTURE

The three-year licensing option proved immediately popular, with nearly half of all altered licenses sold as multi-year renewals in 2025.



PUBLIC OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Communication Channels

WCRAS implemented a multi-layered outreach campaign that included:

- Social media announcements and media briefings.
- Digital lobby signage displaying new fees.
- Direct notices to existing permit holders.
- County website updates and automatic rollout on January 1, 2025.

The message emphasized transparency, noting that fees had not changed in over 20 years, and highlighted the goal of breaking even, not profiting.

Public Feedback

The response was largely neutral to positive:

- Minimal opposition during board meetings.
- Senior residents expressed concern about losing the unaltered senior discount, but WCRAS countered with access to affordable spay/neuter programs.
- Media coverage was balanced, focusing on the agency's intent to modernize operations.
- The new "24 on the Floor" program (first impound redemption free within 24 hours) demonstrated WCRAS's commitment to community partnership, offsetting perceptions of fee increases.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

Financial Outcomes

Licensing Revenue

$537,000

Up from $342,000 in 2024 in just the first nine months of 2025.

Licensing Revenue

57%

Average per-license value more than doubled, rising from $9.13 to $21.65.

Licensing Revenue

$537,000

Across all fees, WCRAS projects 89% cost recovery by 2026.



Programing Impact

Spay/Neuter Fund

$14 from every unaltered license now supports low-cost sterilization initiatives.

> As of September 2025, this generated over $6,000, funding early-stage voucher and TNR (trap-neuter-return) programs.

Return-to-Home Initiatives

The “24 on the Floor” policy has improved pet reunification rates, reducing shelter overcrowding.

Staff Engagement

Internal participation in time studies improved morale and ownership over operational outcomes.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 **Independent validation builds credibility.**
Partnering with an external consultant like MGT provided an unbiased, data-driven foundation that gained trust from both elected officials and the public.

2 **Engagement across all levels is key.**
Including advisory boards, staff, and the community early, ensured buy-in and transparency.

3 **Equity and empathy matter.**
WCRAS intentionally subsidized select fees to demonstrate good faith and balance fiscal responsibility with public accessibility. Taking a "human first" approach, drives favorable results.

4 **Reinvesting in the community drives acceptance.**
Allocating a portion of new revenue to spay/neuter programs reframed the increase as an investment in animal welfare, not bureaucracy.

5 **Sustainability requires ongoing review.**
While no annual fee review is planned, WCRAS anticipates another full analysis within five years to maintain accuracy and fairness.



LOOKING AHEAD

WCRAS's 2025 fee modernization has become a model for animal service agencies nationwide.

Through careful planning, open communication, and a strong emphasis on community reinvestment, the department not only restored financial balance but also strengthened trust and service delivery.



Expanding the spay/neuter voucher program



Enhancing public outreach on the benefits of licensing



Hosting educational webinars and presentations for peer agencies

Insightful Learnings

"Our goal wasn't to take more from taxpayers—it was to deliver better services, more efficiently, and sustainably for the next generation of pet owners."

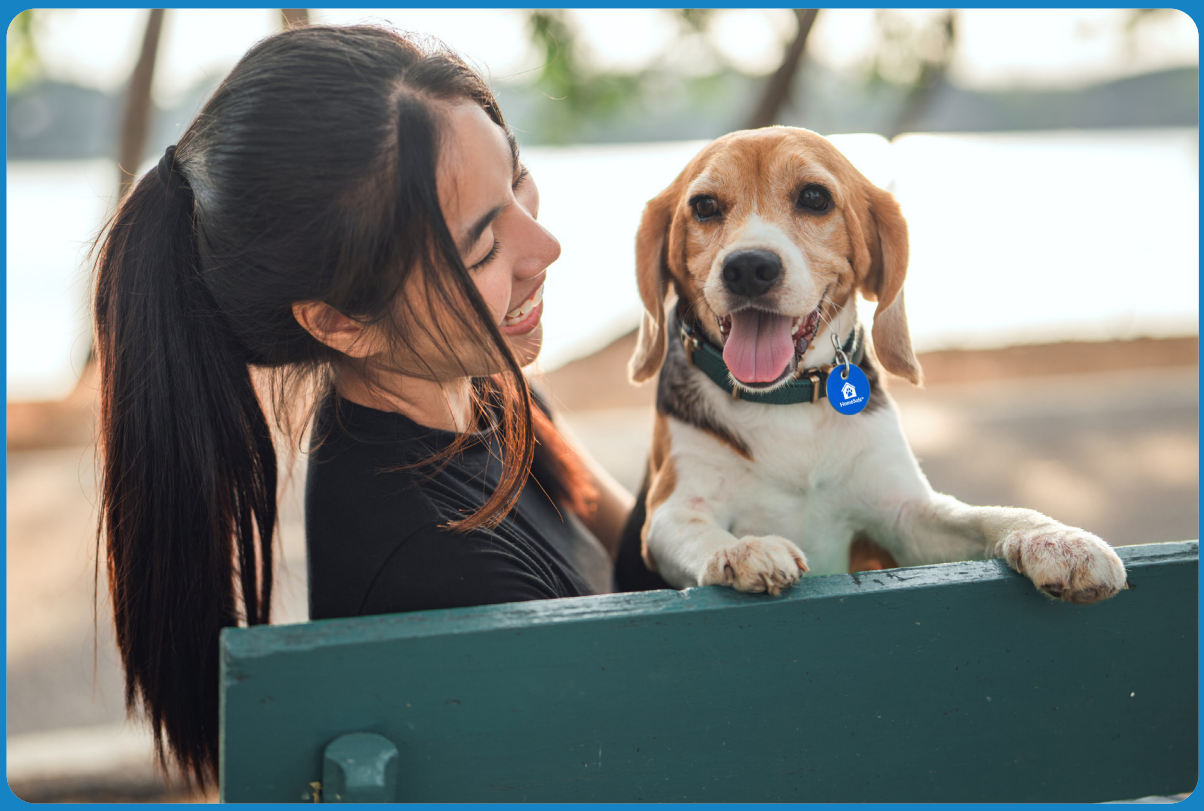
- Shyanne Schull

"We work with people. If someone can't afford it, our goal is still to get them licensed before they walk out the door. And if we need to do billing, we can — we're flexible. We have opportunities to work with our community. We understand, we're all human."

- Ryan Crane

"The WRCAS team demonstrated exceptional dedication in implementing this fee change. Our partnership and collaboration with WRCAS has been such a positive experience, and we look forward to witnessing the meaningful impact that the additional revenue will have on animals in need and their community."

- Tahra Dennett



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