

PRESS RELEASE

Buster - Gage County K9

We would like to address the concerns the public has with what is going on with Buster the Gage County K9. There is a lot of incorrect information that has been going around on social media leading people to jump to many different conclusions. We had a phone call this morning from a concerned individual who doesn't live here but owns property in Gage County and after talking with her and others we felt it was time to issue a brief statement of what is actually happening with the K9 unit.

A quick recap of events. At the June 3rd Gage County Committee meeting we were presented with the issue of Deputy Bebensee accepting another job in Washington County, Nebraska and he would be leaving the Gage County Sheriff's Department/K9 program. Deputy Bebensee asked that Buster be retired and given to him. Deputy Bebensee has been the K9 handler for approximately 2 ½ years. The dog is very young and has had only one handler.

Deputy Bebensee and the Sheriff informed the committee the reasons for why such a young dog should be retired. Deputy Bebensee stated he had talked to the owner/trainer and due to the personality of the dog and attachment issues he could not be used by another handler. He also represented that the handler felt that Buster was worth very little to no monetary value due to this personality as well as the separation anxiety. In addition, these traits actually put Buster at physical risk when not with the deputy because Buster would not eat, circled constantly in his kennel, and lost dangerous amounts of weight when apart from his handler. This is the information that was presented to the board initially. Deputy Bebensee stated he would talk to the donors and Supervisor Lytle requested the Sheriff to contact them and make them aware of the situation we were dealing with. The conversation continued at the board meeting and with Buster's health and safety at apparent risk, the inability to work with another handler, and his value being presented to be little to nothing, the board voted to sell him to Deputy Bebensee for \$250.00. This decision was made based upon the information provided by the Deputy Bebensee and the sheriff.

After this news came out current and former K9 handlers reached out to board members about the information we had received. In addition, it was discovered that the donors were never contacted and were completely unaware of what was going on. The Coffin Foundation and Thomas Foundation, who together donated \$30,000 to start the K9 program, contacted the board with their disappointment of the action that had been taken. Members of the public also commented on how could the county walk away from such a large investment and scrap the K9 program for \$250.00.

Based on this and other information we felt it was important to contact the trainer/previous owner of Buster and ask a few questions pertaining to this breed of dog and who also had provided the information to Colton on the value of Buster and his temperament. It was discovered that no one from the Sheriff's department had contacted the trainer to ask about value of the dog or his ability to work with another handler until after all the information had already been presented to the board. The Sheriff said that he was under the impression that Deputy Bebensee had talked to the trainer and that's where the information he was presenting came from.

The trainer informed the board that Buster would be valued at \$3000 to \$4000 conservatively and could have been another \$2500 had the handler and dog certified as dual purpose. I had been told

that Buster was and was not intended to be a dual-purpose dog and we wanted to confirm this with the trainer. We were informed by the trainer that a premium had been paid for the dog due to the fact that he could be a dual-purpose dog. For whatever reason the two never obtained certification as dual purpose. The trainer informed us that the team had certified and worked together for about a year and then had problems getting recertified. The Deputy contacted the trainer and said there was something wrong with the K9. The trainer had the 2 come retrain and the problem between handler and K9 was corrected and the team did get recertified. The trainer stated he saw no reason why Buster would have a problem working with another handler and that dogs moving on to other handlers is very common in their careers. We were informed that the behavior seen as separation anxiety is the dog wanting to work. This behavior is not uncommon in working dogs. There were multiple things that appeared to be contrary to the information that had been presented originally to the board, so it was decided that this issued should be revisited at the next board meeting.

The \$250.00 for the purchase of Buster had not been paid to the County and a Bill of Sale had not been issued. After reviewing the new information on Buster's abilities and his value the board voted to rescind its prior decision. Since Buster health is not at risk and there is the question as to whether the county has the legal ability to sell Buster in the manner previously proposed it was decided to gather more information and wait for the Sheriff to return before rushing to a decision. State Statute indicates that if a value is \$2500.00 or greater, we are required to follow a certain process to transfer ownership.

To take additional precautions for the health and safety of Buster we have requested the trainer do a physical evaluation of Buster to insure he is not at risk. In addition to the physical evaluation, we have asked for an impartial nonbiased evaluation to be completed by a third party to determine his ability to work with another handler and also on his health and well-being. If the experts tell us that Buster does have the issues presented to us by Deputy Beensee and his health and well-being are at risk we will act very swiftly. The handlers and the trainers we have talked to have told us that it is possible but very, very unlikely that Buster would have any "mental conditions". These results will steer us towards a decision moving forward.

Establishing a price has to do with statutory requirements and an approximate price has to be established to know how the county can transfer surplus property. Buster is legally considered personal property and is owned by Gage County. This means that there are rules and statutes that must be followed because he is public property and different rules apply depending on the value of something. As a public entity there are many additional rules that must be followed vs a private entity.

We ask that people have some patience with this process. The Board wants to resolve the situation with the most positive outcome possible. We would ask that people actually talk to your elected officials when you have concerns and not jump to the wild assumptions and conclusions that social media can foster. There is no easy answer here but we will make every effort to end in a positive outcome by reviewing the facts objectively. The board has statutory duties to the tax payers, but is very concerned of the health & well-being of Buster.