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## Dog rescue shelter called unhealthy

**NORCO: Actor Burt Ward's facility is substandard, council members are told.**

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By PAIGE AUSTIN / The Press-Enterprise

**NORCO** - About a dozen dog rescuers from Southern California appeared before the Norco City Council on Wednesday, accusing a local shelter of keeping animals in substandard conditions.

At a council meeting, the group asked city leaders to revoke the operating permit for Gentle Giants Rescue and Adoptions, a nonprofit rescue shelter at the home of Burt and Tracy Ward. Burt Ward, who was not at the meeting, denied the allegations Thursday. City officials said the Norco Planning Commission and City Council have not had a chance to review and discuss the concerns raised by other rescuers Wednesday. If the allegations are true, the Wards would be in violation of the conditions of their operating permit and their permit could be revoked, confirmed Rene Power, Norco's Animal Control superintendent.

A spokeswoman for the group of rescuers told the council that the Wards failed to adequately care for some animals and violated their nonprofit status by adopting out dogs without spaying or neutering them and charging more for animals with desirable traits.

"We have signed declarations under penalty of perjury by various persons attesting to the poor physical condition of animals at this property -- that they were thin with open sores and wounds. ... They were filthy -- covered in feces and dirt," Kelly Cromer, a dog breeder and rescuer, said at the meeting.

Cromer said the Wards adopted out animals in need of medical care as well as animals that attacked other dogs and a human.

"They are making money off these dogs that they are supposed to be rescuing," she said.

Cromer's speech prompted one audience member to speak up at the meeting about his experience with the rescue shelter.

Richard Hallam, a Norco Parks and Recreations commissioner and owner of a local plumbing company, said one of his employees refused to install a toilet this week because of unsanitary conditions, including dog fecal matter on the floor.

"He said there were 40 dogs in one room," Hallam said. "The carpet was covered with cardboard and the lady said, 'Don't step on that because the carpet is diseased.' "

That is ridiculous, said Burt Ward, best known as Robin the Boy Wonder in the 1960s TV show "Batman." "It is completely false."

Ward said Home Depot had hired the plumber to install the toilet, but he showed up several days late and refused to complete the work because furniture was blocking a hallway while the Ward's rearranged a room. The plumber could not be reached for comment. "He never saw a dog because there was no dog in the house at the time," Ward said.

As to the rescuers' allegations, Ward said he is being targeted with false allegations because of his celebrity status.

"Every accusation was false. None of those people were ever on our property, nor did they ever adopt a dog from us," he said. "There are a lot of people who are envious or jealous."

Ward insisted he and his wife maintain a state-of-the-art property and Gentle Giants has rescued and placed thousands of healthy dogs, he said.

According to a 2003, tax form filed by Tracy Ward, the shelter earned \$22,294 and spent \$22,318. On their Web site -- [www.gentlegiantsrescue.com](http://www.gentlegiantsrescue.com) -- they offer nearly round-the-clock telephone help for dog owners at \$695 a year along with a year's supply of the \$43.50 a bag dog food made by the Wards.

Film producer Mike Cargile, said he adopted his two dogs -- Broadway and Hollywood -- from Gentle Giants this year. After his previous dog died late last year, he adopted a 16-month-old Great Dane mix for about \$600.

"She's the best dog I ever had," he said in a phone interview. "I'm ready to get two more."

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