Press Release Regarding the Attorney General’s 3/31/17 Announcement of Indictments

In accordance with the plan of action formulated last year, the Town has worked diligently to support the Attorney General's investigation by securing the original crime scene and developing a comprehensive report and inventory of evidence that forms the basis of these charges. This has been a thorough albeit lengthy process culminating in the announcements made today. The Town will continue to support the Attorney General's effort to hold accountable those individuals responsible for alleged animal neglect and abuse. As you can see from the BOS Plan of Action below, we are continuing on several fronts to address the broader nature of this problem and formulate policy and personnel changes that will prevent its occurrence.

Although we have made excellent progress on many of the aspects of our plan, we are mindful of the fact that this is a real and difficult problem with which the Town has struggled. This is underscored by the fact that this problem has occurred twice in the past 7 years. However, this alleged behavior appears to be isolated, in both cases, to one property utilizing a unique tenant arrangement. As such, it is not a reflection on the many excellent farmers we have here in Westport who are using industry best practices to produce high quality products. We have much work to do here and with our partners at the State level to make sure that this problem is properly and permanently addressed. Our entire Town government is fully committed to the success of those efforts.

BOS Tenant Farm Plan of Action

1.) Immediate actions required to address the initial emergency and crime scene. This included soliciting assistance from outside agencies for the care and shelter of over 1,000 animals, securing the crime scene and developing a comprehensive report and inventory of evidence for the Attorney General’s Office, finding a suitable plot of land and executing a lease of same to the ASPCA where a temporary rescue farm was built and to where all of the animals were relocated, and finally, provide round the clock security for the rescue farm.

2.) Determine the scope of this issue to insure that there are no other sites in Town with similar conditions. In this case our office assembled and worked with a multi-disciplined ad hoc committee to review past complaints and identify sites that may have been suspect. A total of 6 locations were identified and visited by a qualified animal inspector and our Animal Control Office. We found satisfactory conditions at
all six. As an extension of this effort, the BOS sought and received authority to nominate Animal Inspectors to the State Department of Agricultural Resources. Further, we have made some personnel and procedural changes with regard to animal inspections. These changes have already yielded results in that more than twenty new sites with farm animals have been identified and added to our annual census/inspection list to date. We expect that this number will increase before our annual census is complete. The good news is that of these new sites, only one was found to have practices in need of review and that site has been properly referred to the appropriate authorities for follow up. Further, our annual animal census and inspection is on schedule to be completed prior to the end of the year. A big improvement over years past.

3.) Monitor the original 177 site and prevent re-emergence of the problem before criminal and civil actions and resolution of the current situation can be completed. The BOS has initiated legal action to prevent the owner of the 177 farm from housing animals on the property until the case can be settled and proper oversight can be instituted, unsafe structures can be demolished and the site cleaned up. This is an ongoing situation for which you can view the details on our website.

4.) Review the performance of Town departments and employees involved in the oversight of animal health and welfare. This also is an ongoing situation being performed on a timetable not fully controlled by the BOS. Since these are largely human resource related actions, they are being conducted in non-public forums. Where we find deficiencies we will be taking appropriate disciplinary and/or re-training actions (see personnel and procedural changes noted in #2 above). This phase is also intended to provide fact finding background for #5 below. We have already determined that the performance of the ACO throughout the period leading up to the discovery of issues this past summer has been excellent. However, we find that the mission of the ACO would better aligned with that of the BOS or BOH. So for now we have moved the ACO from the Police Department to the BOS. We have also hired three part time assistants to ACO who are also qualified Animal Inspectors. Recently the BOS expanded the scope of this investigation to include a review of the efficacy of relevant State agencies as well as their communications with Town officials. This aspect of our investigation has been assigned to the Animal Action Committee (see #5 below).

5.) Determine what actions are required on the part of the Town to improve our oversight of animal health and welfare and implement same. The Board of Selectman established the Animal Action Committee, a multi-disciplined board given the charge of reviewing our current regulatory powers and procedures and determine what changes or additional powers might be necessary to address this issue. This process will now run parallel with other efforts mentioned above and will take some time to produce thoughtful, comprehensive results.