

Kitten saved by firefighters



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Ellen Ross holds Fireball, a kitten rescued from a storm drain Monday. Ross heard the cat crying and contacted the Topeka Fire Department to save it.

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A tiny yellow tabby kitten has a new home after Topeka firefighters removed her from a storm sewer drain Monday, hours before nearly an inch of rain drenched the city.

Ellen Ross, the new owner, said Wednesday the one-pound kitten surely would have drowned if Ross hadn't insisted city workers rescue her — even to the point of involving Mayor Bill Bunten.

“I was hellbent on getting that kitty out of the sewer,” she said. Ross, who ran unsuccessfully in April for the city council, recalled Monday's rescue Wednesday while stroking the 3- to 4-week-old kitten at the Topeka home where she said she and her boyfriend, Mike “Doggie” Thacher, keep 20 dogs, 18 cats, 11 birds, four chickens, a rooster and two ducks. Ross said she is licensed by the state of Kansas to have that many animals at her home.

Ross said her daughter, 20-year-old Jessica Ross, first saw the kitten and heard her crying shortly after leaving her job at about 4 p.m. Monday at the Docking State Office Building.

Ellen Ross arrived to give her a daughter a ride and learned the kitten was about seven feet below ground level in a storm sewer drain covered by iron grates along S.W. 9th, near the southeast corner of its intersection with S.W. Topeka Boulevard. No other cats or kittens were seen in the area.

Ellen Ross said she used her cell phone to arrange for a city animal control officer, and subsequently a water pollution control employee, to come to the scene. She said the water pollution control worker removed one of the grates but wouldn't let Ross go to the kitten, saying deadly carbon monoxide could be present in the drain.

Ross said she called and tried unsuccessfully to get a fire truck sent to the scene, then called Bunten.

Firefighters subsequently arrived and tested the sewer drain for carbon monoxide, finding the levels to be safe. Ross said the water pollution control employee removed the manhole atop another drain located about 25 feet away from the drain covered by the grates, and determined carbon monoxide levels in that drain were also safe.

Topeka firefighter Chad Swift and Capt. Rex Orton went into the drains, as the kitten took refuge in an underground pipe located between them. Orton said firefighters used water from a booster line to flush out the kitten, which was caught by Swift.

Ross recalled Wednesday of Swift, "He had a look on his face like he had just delivered a baby!"

Ross took the kitten to a veterinarian's office and was billed \$55.97 for care that included treatment for matting on the kitten's left eye. She said the kitten on Wednesday was eating and taking fluids well.

Ross said one of her daughters suggested naming the kitten "Sooeey" because it came out of a sewer, but she thought that would be inappropriate. She said she chose to go with "Fireball" instead.

Bunten mentioned the rescue during announcements at the end of Tuesday's city council meeting, expressing praise for both Ross and the firefighters involved.

Ross said she was happy with the way her tax money was spent during Monday's rescue. She said she appreciated that the city showed compassion for the kitten.

City spokesman David Bevens said Wednesday the city normally doesn't send firefighters to perform cat rescues but did so Monday primarily out of concern for the safety of the city employees present.

Bevens said the city paid about \$25 in addition to his regular pay to the water pollution control worker who worked some overtime at the scene, while no extra money was paid to firefighters because they were on a regular 24-hour shift. It wasn't immediately clear if the police animal control unit would pay any overtime linked to the call.

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