

City offers \$1M for Lighthouse Field



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A great blue heron lifts off from Lighthouse Field State Beach on Monday with the field's namesake Mark Abbott Lighthouse visible through a break in the trees. The city has offered the state \$1 million for the property.

Lighthouse Field

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Proposal gets nod from dog owners; deal could be inked by mid-November

By **SHANNA McCORD**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Mayor Emily Reilly has offered \$1 million to buy Lighthouse Field State Beach, and State Parks officials appear eager to strike a deal before mid-November when they're obliged to resume control — and hefty annual maintenance costs — of the park.

Reilly's bid on behalf of the city

includes paying for the West Cliff Drive park over 40 years without interest.

The sale would allow city officials to allow dogs to run off leash, which is prohibited at all state-owned parks and beaches across California but something local residents have long pushed for.

The state Department of Parks, yet to respond to Reilly's offer, is waiting for an appraisal of the 37-acre

park's "fair market value" by the state Department of General Services before moving forward, State Parks spokesman Roy Stearns said.

"The offer is a positive step in the direction both the city and state wish to go in having the city own the property," Stearns said Monday. "We've always believed it would be more appropriate for Lighthouse Field to be a local park."

A change in ownership would

relieve the state of picking up the park's \$200,000 annual maintenance cost — covered by the city since 1977 — and enforcing round-the-clock leash rules on dog owners who've made visiting the area with their pets a daily habit since the city began allowing dogs to run without a leash in the early 1990s.

Assemblyman John Laird, D-San-

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ta Cruz, opened the door for sale of the land to take place by drafting legislation that allows the state to sell Lighthouse Field to the city. The legislation was approved in the state's 2007-08 budget.

City officials say they'd rather own the park, and implement their own leash policies, than enforce state rules when the 30-year contract with the state ends Nov. 15.

"The city is interested in buying the property because we've been managing it for 30 years and we have a good sense about what the community wants on the field and beach," Vice Mayor Ryan Coonerty said. "There's no other issue I've received more e-mails or phone calls in the last three years than dogs at Lighthouse Field."

Friends of Lighthouse Field, a group of several hundred dog owners across the county, has lobbied hard for city officials to find a way to keep the area open for off-leash dogs. The group has written hundreds of letters to city and state leaders pleading their case, and they've raised about \$10,000 during the past year to help defend the off-leash policy.

"We're not a group that would go away," Zee Zaballos, Friends of Lighthouse Field member, said. "This issue is bigger than dogs off leash. It's about protecting a place for people to socialize. We absolutely see the value in having this managed by the city."

Lighthouse Field could see changes to the off-leash policy, despite city ownership.

Santa Cruz officials failed to analyze the impact of unleashed dogs on the environment when updating the general plan for Lighthouse Field State Beach in 2003, and a lawsuit in May 2005 by residents opposed to off-leash dogs, resulted in the city being told an environmental study to examine the impact of dogs is necessary.

The ruling from the 6th District Court of Appeals said, "The city incorrectly ignored the possibility of increases in visitors with off-leash dogs resulting from adop-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Using Lighthouse Field as a living science laboratory, Gateway School eighth-graders walk near monarch butterfly habitat formed by eucalyptus trees Monday. The city has offered \$1 million to the state for the park.

tion of the revised general plan."

Grant Weseman, a critic of the off-leash policy and part of the group that sued the city, looks forward to an environmental study.

"Any way they cut it, the city is going to have to do an environmental impact report," Weseman said. "I don't think the off-leash dog thing has a chance of passing environmental review."

The worry by Weseman and others is that dogs harm the environment by possibly scaring away birds, biting people and pooping on native plants.

The state purchased the park in 1977 for \$4.6 million, a price that included yearly contributions from the city and the county to maintain and preserve it.

City and state officials predict today's sale price will be lower because the state has stipulated the land remain park space without the possibility of being turned into beach-front development.



Lighthouse Field is a popular dog-walking locale for Westside residents. The city has offered \$1 million to the state for the park.

"It's a deed restricted to park purposes," Stearns said. "We want to continue the kind of use that's there now."

Stearns said an appraisal from

the Department of General Services is expected within the next week.

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