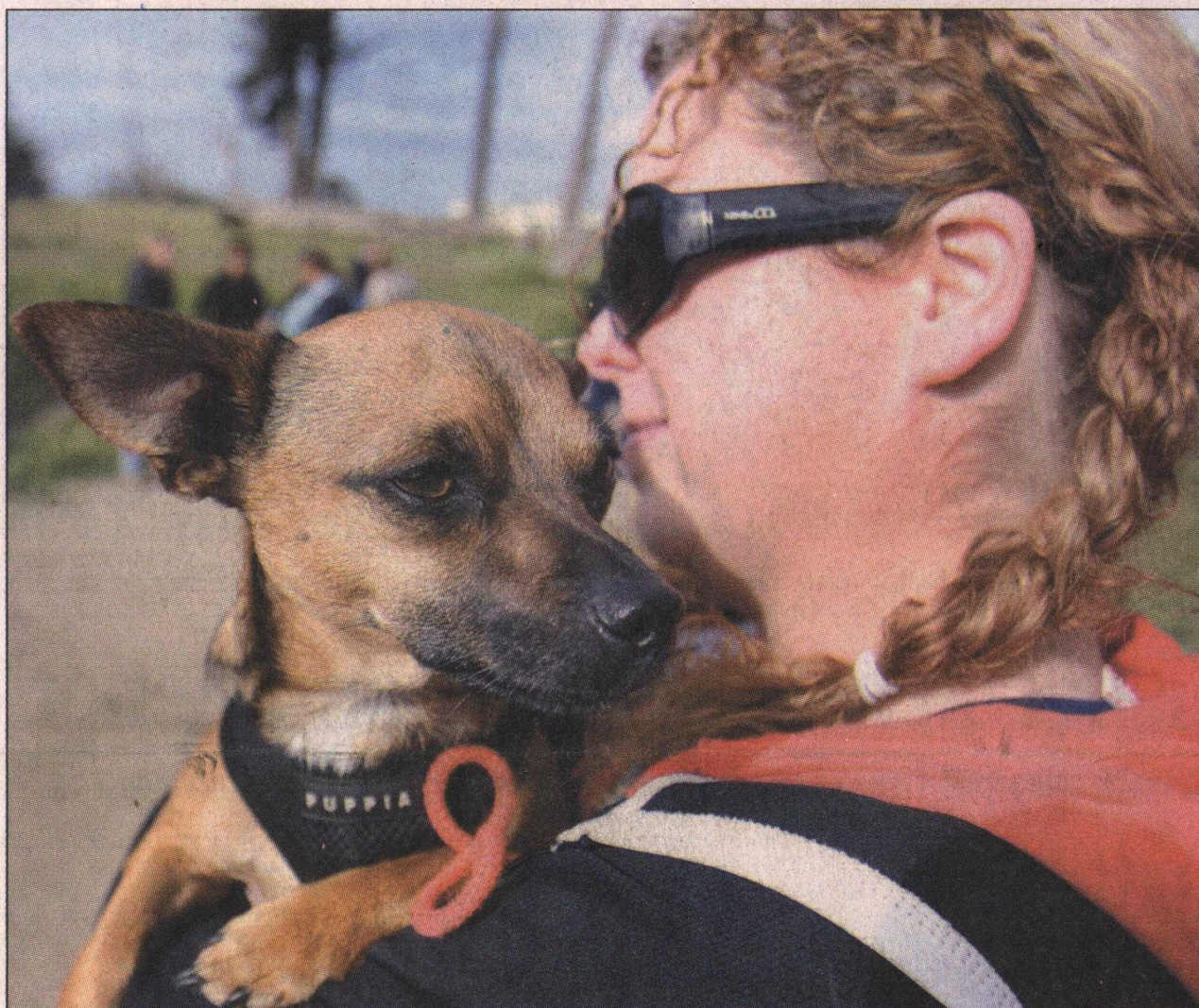


Lighthouse Field back to the dogs for a day

Dog owners defiantly hold off-leash rally



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Mingus gets some leashless care from owner Karissa Paxton Saturday morning at Lighthouse Field State Beach.

Lighthouse Field

4-6-08



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Santa Cruz Councilman Tony Madrigal and Shorty show up to support Saturday's off-leash rally at Lighthouse Field State Beach.

By J.M. BROWN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Tucker, a 1½-year-old caramel-colored cockapoo, is fairly new to life in general, let alone the contentious debate that has so many dog lovers hot under the collar.

He sniffed around Lighthouse Field State Beach Saturday morning, blissfully unaware of the civil disobedience in which he and dozens of other four-legged friends were taking part. To them, the rally of several dozen dog lovers seemed like just another sunny play date in the park overlooking the sea, but to their owners it provided a chance to snarl anew at the state's recent ban on off-leash dogs.

"This is a wonderful place for him to socialize and a great place for he and I to bond," said Tucker's owner, Carol King of Santa Cruz, who supports the city's ongoing negotiations with California parks officials to buy the park and possibly reinstate off-leash hours. "It will be a great loss," she said, if the two sides can't reach a deal.

For 15 years, the city had allowed dogs to be off-leash before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m., but returned management of the park to the state in November. After giving dog owners four months to comply with its ruling to keep dogs leashed at the 37-acre site, State Parks warned that rangers would step up enforcement beginning March 17.

Friends of Lighthouse Field, a politically connected group of dog lovers that boasts 3,000 members, organized Saturday's protest, encouraging the crowd to set free their German shepherds, dachshunds and Labradors, and keep fighting to



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A pair of dogs romp together at Lighthouse Field on Saturday morning.

Dogs

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reverse the rule. Friends of Lighthouse Field supporters — who also collected bottles, drug paraphernalia, cans and condom wrappers as part of a post-protest cleanup effort — say the ban has robbed them and their canine companions of a favorite hang-out and led to an increase in drug use and illegal camping because some have abandoned the park to walk their dogs elsewhere.

"We will not let this community be displaced," the group's chair, Betsy Firebaugh, said through a megaphone. "There is hope."

Vice Mayor Cynthia Mathews, Councilman Tony Madrigal and Assembly candidate Barbara Sprenger spoke at the event, saying they supported the group's struggle to regain local control of the park.

"We are trying to find a solution," Mathews said. "I appreciate your staying power."

Karl Tallman, public safety superintendent for the Santa Cruz district of California State Parks, said he sanctioned the rally but did not OK off-leash dogs. He said the agency chose not to enforce the rule Saturday in order to "build a positive relationship with the community and promote good stewardship."

Tallman said rangers and lifeguards have issued verbal warnings to between 10-15 people daily since mid-March but given no written citations. He said dog owners who are seen violating the leash law are required to identify themselves to rangers, and their names go into a database of people who have been warned. A second offense could lead to a ticket, which could cost \$211 including court fees.

He said rangers monitored Saturday's rally, but "due to the political sensitivity and strong emotions surrounding this issue, immediate enforcement [of the leash rule] was a lower priority than making sure it was a peaceful event," Tallman said.

Although there were a few minor scuffles between dogs at the rally, a bigger kerfuffle unfolded between canine owners and an unnamed detractor, who engaged in shouting that twice interrupted the demonstration. Peggy Pollard, one of three people who successfully sued the city in 2005 to keep dogs tethered at the park, identified the man as an ally but declined to give his name.

Defiantly standing near the center of the demonstration, Pollard and supporter Gill Greensite said unrestrained dogs have caused a public safety hazard and negatively affected the park environment. They said unleashed dogs have charged at people and birds while owners look the other way, respond to criticism with a profane finger and neglect to pick up excrement.

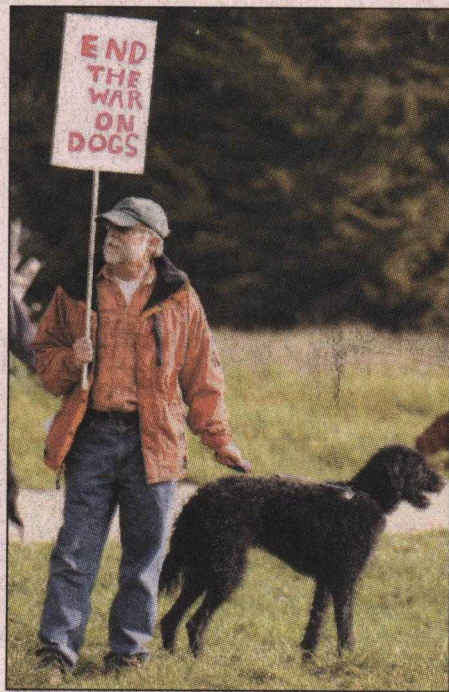
"Not all owners are responsible for keeping people safe," Pollard said.

"It's a loss of habitat," Greensite said, adding that birds have left the area in droves because of the dogs. "They have basically taken over the park."

After hovering nearby to monitor the remarks, opponent Zee Zaballos lobbied against Pollard, saying, "I feel like they are really close-minded. The park should be available for everyone."

Firebaugh said dog owners act responsibly at the park, and have invested time and energy restoring the area and keeping it clean. "This is really the fabric of the community," she said. "These are my friends."

Although Ray Gwen Smith has three acres in Bonny Doon for her 4-year-old dog Shea



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

UCSC professor Greg Herken with a printed statement about Lighthouse Field leash regulations Saturday at the park.

to run around on, she used to bring him 15 miles to Lighthouse Field three times a week because it was a great opportunity for them both to socialize. She stopped coming as often since the ban was put in place.

"Dogs need to be off leash to play," she said, "otherwise they get strange."

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