

Off-leash dog issue back on track

Supervisor Leopold wants county parks commission to review

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SANTA CRUZ — One of the thorniest decisions for any elected official finally looks to be lurching toward the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors: dogs, and whether they should be leashed.

Supervisor John Leopold, who has moderated a long-running and unresolved debate about off-leash dogs in Live Oak, has asked the county's Parks and Recreation Commission to weigh in on whether to open up more beaches and other open space for dogs to run unfettered, a question that appears to have no easy resolution.

"People love their pets, and people love their coast. When those two things converge, people express themselves," Leopold said.

Leopold — who has seen the issue consume community meetings — sought and received policy recommendations from groups on either side of the issue. Together, they comprise 23 pages, and he hopes to see the commission debate the issue in April. Beyond that, the Board of Supervisors could weigh in.

"I would say they're very far apart," Leopold said, describing the two factions.

The issue has lingered since local animal control officers stepped up enforcement of the county's leash laws more than a year ago. Over the years, numerous local beaches such as Seabright and those in the East Cliff area had become de facto off-leash areas.

The debate has been spirited. At 51,000, Santa Cruz County's estimated dog population nearly equals the 55,000 children living here. And there are more dogs per capita in Santa Cruz County than there are in Los Angeles County or even the city of San Francisco, where canine popularity has forced a number of civic accommodations and public policy debates.

Here, the most recent development was a unanimous vote in August by the county's Animal Shelter board to endorse more off-leash areas for dogs. But the board said those areas should be fenced, and it did not specify where they should be.

Jean Brocklebank, of Leash Law Advocates of Santa Cruz County, or LASSCC (pronounced "Lassie"), endorsed that recommendation, saying it protects dogs, people and the environment. And, she said, it rules out the shoreline.

"There's no way we're going to fence the beach," Brocklebank

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said, herself a former dog owner who pointed out the county's leash laws are written into local planning documents and who believes off-leash beach areas would trigger strict environmental reviews.

Beach fencing also likely would have to clear several regulatory hurdles, including review by the state Coastal Commission, which has input over planning and land use in the county's coastal areas.

Live Oak Off-Leash Advocates, or LOOLA, has been arguing strongly for more off-leash areas on beaches, suggesting 21st Avenue beach as a leash-free zone during morning and evening hours only. While beaches have been widely used by dog owners for decades, officially there a few off-leash areas



A woman walks her two dogs Monday afternoon at Seabright State Beach.

MATTHEW HINTZ/SENTINEL

in the county, and only one — Mitchell's Cove in Santa Cruz — along the ocean.

Advocates say the current debate isn't the result of a failure of leash law enforcement or of dog owners, but of policy. Local lawmakers have not responded to a growing population of dog lovers, who've been forced to carve out their own solutions, they argue.

Live Oak Off-Leash Advo-

cates member Ted Coopman said the debate is a symptom of Santa Cruz's sometimes "schizophrenic" clash between its culture and its laws — promoting a local music scene while cracking down on noise ordinances, for instance, or purporting to be dog-friendly while ticketing dog owners.

"It's groovy, everything is OK. But in actuality if you look at where you can take

your dog, it's not very dog-friendly," said Coopman, who believes sharing 21st Avenue beach while leaving prime sunbathing hours to beachgoers is a compromise everyone could live with.

The issue doesn't appear to be dissipating. One dog owner recently challenged the county's jurisdiction to write tickets, legal citations have been tossed around and even Live Oak Off-Leash Advocates' Save Our Shores "Adopt-a-Beach" signs at 21st Avenue have been repeatedly vandalized.

Asked whether he thought the vandalism was related to the debate, Coopman recalled an aphorism.

"What is it? The first time is happenstance, the second time is coincidence and the third time is enemy action," he said.

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