

POOCHES OFF LEASH

DOG LOVERS MAKE RENEWED PITCH FOR LIGHTHOUSE FIELD

Group suggests sale, land swap to let pups roam free



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Betsy Firebaugh, of Friends of Lighthouse Field, and Rally enjoy Lighthouse Field.

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — Dogs roaming free on Lighthouse Field and Its Beach was outlawed four years ago, but a longtime advocacy group has been working quietly behind the scenes since then to revive talks on a land deal that could open the park to off-leash pups once more.

With a sympathetic mayor at City Hall and an influential friend in Sacramento, Friends of Lighthouse Field has recently asked the city to raise several proposals with California State Parks, including the city buying the 36-acre oceanfront property or swapping it for a city-owned greenbelt that is six times larger and closer to a key state park. But the campaign promises to be an uphill battle for the dog lobby.

The Friends propose that maintenance costs — which the city estimates at \$200,000 — would remain the state's responsibility for five years or be offset by new off-leash permit fees and support from the Friends group. The group wants to restore off-leash hours to what they were before the state retook possession of the field, before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m.

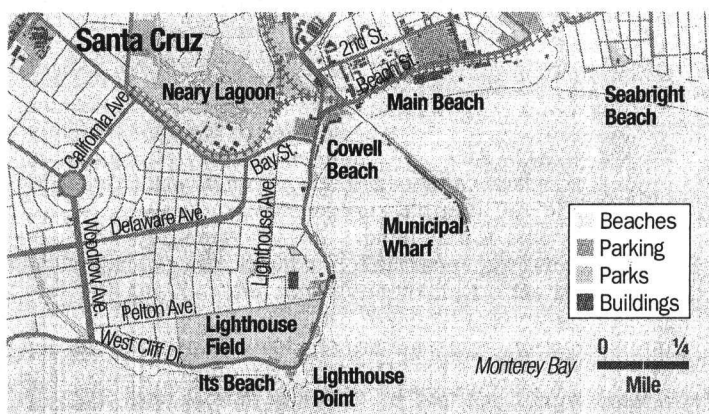
Even in a swap for Moore Creek Reserve — rather than a straight sale of Lighthouse Field State Beach — the Friends suggest the state also pick up most costs for a mandatory environmental analysis of allowing dogs off leash at Lighthouse Field. The group argues the state would be getting a far more valuable property in 246-acre reserve.

The City Council was poised to discuss the proposals in closed session July 12, but opponents took issue with the secrecy. The city attorney agreed the council could only review the matter in private if actual details about



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John McGuire and Margaret Barrow walk their dogs in Lighthouse Field last week.



DOGS

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land negotiations were discussed.

Parks and Recreation Director Dannettee Shoemaker is slated to brief the council in closed session again after 1:30 p.m. Tuesday to discuss "a land transfer," according to the agenda. The council will hear public comment on closed session items before meeting.

As much as Shoemaker is willing to help the Friends group, her hopes aren't high for getting a deal done amid ongoing belt-tightening at City Hall and the state Capitol.

"Under the current fiscal situation, I'm not that optimistic," Shoemaker said. "We don't have additional resources to take on park and beach space.

She said the Friends group's proposals are creative, but "I don't know if any of them will fly."

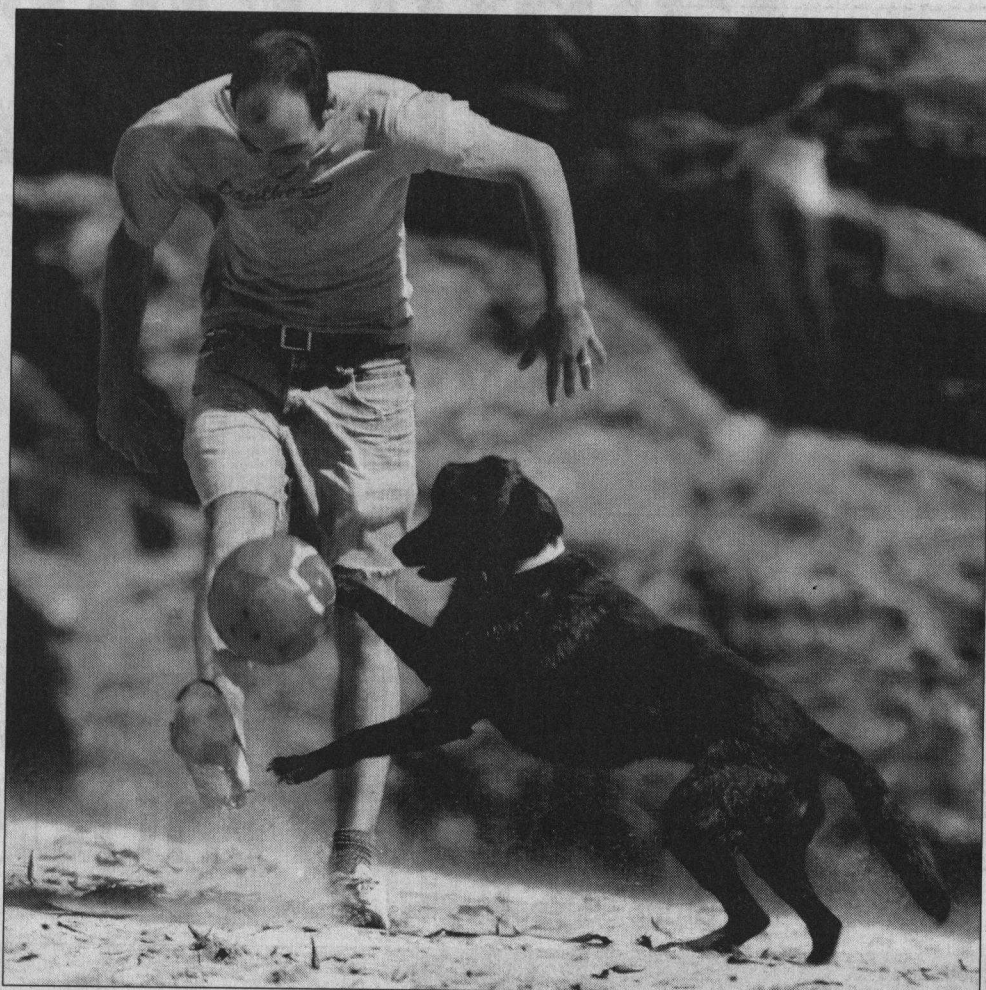
TIMING ISN'T GREAT

After reducing an \$8 million budget deficit to \$1 million through labor cuts and other measures, city officials say they are in no position to resume \$200,000 in annual maintenance on Lighthouse Field State Beach. Nor, they say, can the city underwrite a mandatory environmental review of allowing dogs off leash, one Shoemaker said could cost between \$100,000 to \$200,000.

Meanwhile, State Parks, which doesn't permit off-leash dogs in any of its parks, is considering closing 70 sites next summer due to Sacramento's chronic shortfalls. While the state might consider off-loading Lighthouse Field during these hard economic times — the city was close to buying the property in 2007 — the state is unlikely to agree to maintain land it doesn't own anymore.

"It's hard to imagine any scenario where we would take on an additional expense," said John Laird, who formerly represented Santa Cruz in the Assembly and now serves as Secretary of Natural Resources, a job that oversees State Parks.

"I would be interested in looking at them," Laird said.



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Dario Marghriti and his dog get in a little soccer workout at Its Beach last week.

special place for that is fine, but using Lighthouse Field is taking away one of best public parks in the area."

But John McGuire, a former engineer in the city water department, believes the exact opposite. The Westside resident argues that opening public spaces to dogs will draw people, not push them away.

McGuire and other members of the Friends want to reverse Santa Cruz's reputation for being dog-unfriendly among travelers. They see the council's recent granting of a trial period for allowing dogs downtown again and the return of Lighthouse Field as an off-leash park as moving the city in the right direction.

"Santa Cruz has missed a big opportunity," McGuire said on a recent walk through the field with Gracie, his 12-year-old Beagle and Cooper, a 7-year-old poodle. "It could start a whole new trend in Santa Cruz."

FROM CITY'S PERSPECTIVE

Santa Cruz leased and maintained Lighthouse Field State Beach from 1977 to 2007.

a swap for Lighthouse Field State Beach and Moore Creek Reserve benefits both sides. She said Lighthouse Field isn't the best model for a state park because it's not pristine land and is surrounded by neighborhoods, whereas Moore Creek Reserve is a much larger open space nearly adjacent to Wilder Ranch State Park off Highway 1.

She argues there wouldn't be a cost increase for maintenance for either the city or the state as long as each agrees to fund costs as they exist today for the next five years. Although the ownership would change hands, the city would continue to maintain Moore Creek Reserve and State Parks would tend to Lighthouse Field.

Shoemaker acknowledged usability for the city would be far greater on Lighthouse Field than in Moore Creek Reserve. She said parks staff spends about two hours per week maintaining the open space near Wilder Ranch State Park.

"We spend so little on

under the Friends plan.

"I welcome an EIR because it will confirm what we all know, that dogs off leash have a minimal impact," she said.

Firebaugh often walks Rally, a 6-year-old black Labrador she inherited part time after the death of a friend last fall, through the field. She said off-leash dogs offer the "social impact" of keeping drug dealing and illegal camping down.

No information was available Friday on how many citations, arrests or contacts state parks rangers have made around Lighthouse Field State Beach this year. But in July 2010, a state parks superintendent reported that drug use and vagrancy had not increased on the field since dogs were put back on leashes in 2007.

Between early 2009 and mid 2010, State Parks rangers wrote nearly 90 citations for camping and 14 for off-leash dogs. Dogs are often seen running off leash on It's Beach, though the law is more closely followed in the field.

represented Santa Cruz in the Assembly and now serves as Secretary of Natural Resources, a job that oversees State Parks.

"I would be interested in looking at them," Laird said of the Friends' proposals. "But the state is not in the position of taking on any more financial liability at this point."

The Friends have been working with local state parks officials, who they say are interested in an agreement with the city. But those officials were not available or did not return requests for comment.

However, Roy Stearns, a State Parks spokesman in Sacramento, said, "We are always interested in possible outcomes. I'm not sure what they are at this point, so we would have to see what kind of proposal would come out of closed sessions (at the council.)"

COSTS REMAIN KEY

The Friends acknowledge their renewed campaign comes at a time of great hand wringing over government balance sheets. And there is the ever-present threat of more litigation from a small group of residents fiercely opposed to off-leash dogs.

Betsy Firebaugh, a leader of Friends of Lighthouse Field, said the organization has tried to devise proposals that won't create additional costs for the city or state.

She said she hopes the city won't give in to pressure from her opponents, who won a lawsuit in 2005 that forced the city to conduct an environmental study on the impact of dogs being off-leash in the park. The city declined, so the state retook possession of the field after a 30-year management lease expired and began issuing warnings and citations for off-leash dogs.

"The city and City Council are being held hostage by a small group of three to five individuals whose only contribution is to take legal action," Firebaugh said. "It's time for this group to step out of the legal shadows and start contributing to the parks and community they claim to defend."

One of those litigants, Westside resident Peggy Pollard, said she would consider going to court again to stop the Friends, if their plans got any real traction with the city and state.

"It's not welcoming to the general public to have off-leash dogs," Pollard said. "Dogs are very aggressive. Having a

start a whole new... Santa Cruz."

FROM CITY'S PERSPECTIVE

Santa Cruz leased and maintained Lighthouse Field State Beach from 1977 to 2007. Although State Parks doesn't allow off-leash dogs, the city let them run free on the field and beach before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m. since 1993.

Laird, then a member of the Assembly and a supporter of the Friends group, wrote special legislation to facilitate the sale of the land. But the city's \$1 million offer was rejected by the state and a subsequent deal to buy just the 2.5-acre beach for \$103,000 also fizzled.

The city settled on splitting with the state \$80,000 in legal fees stemming from the lawsuit filed by opponents of off-leash dogs. The city was not only reluctant to pay for an environmental study and any legal challenge that was likely to follow, but money for ongoing maintenance had also gone away.

In 2008, facing a hemorrhaging budget, the council made major cuts to Parks and Recreation programs, including employee layoffs and closing the Teen Center, Beach Flats Center, Harvey West Pool and the Santa Cruz Natural History Museum. Some of the recreation sites have stayed open with help from nonprofits and private donations, but the cuts have made it nonetheless difficult to justify any new spending.

Mayor Ryan Coonerty, who has supported the idea of off-leash dogs on the field and negotiated the near-sale with the state in 2007, said he is concerned about the potential costs involved in taking another shot.

"I don't think we are planning on moving on it," he said. "We're operating with severely limited funds."

Coonerty said any deal would require the state to bear the costs, and that any legal challenges must be resolved before Santa Cruz could consider taking over the land.

If the cost is more than nominal, the Friends group has recommended using Capital Improvement Projects money from the Parks and Recreation Department budget to buy the land. But Shoemaker said the list of projects to be funded with that money, which currently totals \$880,000, is long and underfunded.

LAND SWAP IDEA

Firebaugh hopes to convince the city and state that

spends about two hours per week maintaining the open space near Wilder Ranch State Park.

"We spend so little on Moore Creek and there is so little use compared to Lighthouse Field in its heyday," Shoemaker said. "I don't think there is anything in the county like what the city has at Lighthouse Field and It's Beach."

There are seven other areas where dogs are allowed off leash in Santa Cruz, including Frederick Street and Grant Street parks, and Mitchell's Cove Beach. Dogs will be allowed on leash downtown after late August if the council finalizes a vote Tuesday to overturn a 36-year ban, and dogs are welcome leashed in other state parks and beaches.

Another problem: Santa Cruz and its many open-space advocates worked hard for years to build a greenbelt around the city, including Pogonip and Arana Gulch. Those proponents won't want to lose Moore Creek Reserve.

That's a concern for Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, a champion of the city's acquisition of greenbelt areas decades ago. She also is concerned about the Friends' suggestion to use capital improvement funds to buy the land.

"There are so many backed-up current projects and we had to let so many employees go," she said. "That is general fund money."

Although Beiers is not a fan of increasing dog access in high-traffic public places — she has preliminarily voted against dogs downtown — she said her concern over Lighthouse Field is purely financial.

"There is a cost neutral way in perpetuity, including the EIR, I have no problem with it," Beiers said.

NOT GIVING UP HOPE

Firebaugh said the Friends group is happy to contribute to the cost of an Environmental Impact Report.

"We need to know things are moving in that direction" in order to dedicate the funds, she said.

Firebaugh estimated the study would cost upwards of \$80,000, saying the proposed change in use is only to allow off-leash for a few hours each day, and therefore shouldn't require a great deal of study. The park is open from sunrise to sunset, but dogs would only be allowed in the morning until 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m.,

camping and... dogs. Dogs are often seen running off leash on It's Beach, though the law is more closely followed in the field.

Whether off-leash dogs are good for people, owners say it certainly is good for the pups.

Margaret Barrow of Santa Cruz, a dog walker who is not a member of the Friends group, comes to the field often.

"A dog off leash is more calm and confident," she said, walking two Boston terriers named Fenway, 4, and Clyde, 7 months. She said as long as she had the owners' permission, she would socialize them to be off leash.

Firebaugh said the Friends have also proven themselves worthy stewards of the park. They host regular clean-ups and recently raised \$3,000 recently to repair 13 stairs leading from West Cliff Drive to It's Beach.

"We've been here 10 years and we're not giving up," she said.

OPPOSITION STILL STRONG

Pollard, one of several residents who sued to stop off-leash dogs at Lighthouse Field, said new proposals by the Friends to get the field back should be reviewed in public, not behind closed doors.

"If there hasn't been a big public discussion, it's an underhanded way to get what they want," she said. "It's one of our most beautiful parks and to throw that away to the dogs without much public input is a mishandling of what is entrusted to city officials."

Gillian Greensite, who was also part of the 2005 suit, said that with other local sites to run dogs free, "It is greedy for (the Friends group) to agitate for Lighthouse Field to be traded for off-leash dog use."

"Off-leash dog use basically becomes a single use, driving out others who enjoy the quietness of the field, who go there to paint or relax or to hear the birds and see the monarch butterflies which are now more numerous in Lighthouse Field than they are at Natural Bridges," she said.

Former City Councilman Ed Porter, who lives across the street from Lighthouse Field, said he doesn't believe the city should pay for an environmental review. He believes dogs have scared off rabbits, quail and other wildlife.

"Really the rosy picture that dog proponents have painted is not accurate," he said. "It's really been devastating to the environment."