

Spare some chains?

Dog owners to petition county officials for more off-leash areas

Animal
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APTOS — Dog owners won't roll over and play dead when it comes to the issue of off-leash parks.

Those who have long fought for more public space dedicated to their four-legged friends have collected more than 1,000 signatures they plan to put in front of parks officials, urging them to loosen the leash rules in Santa Cruz County.

However, the target of the petition — the director of the county's Parks Commission — says the department simply doesn't have the funding.

"An off-leash park, just like a regular park, costs money," Barry Samuel said.

But the push continues for more off-leash access throughout the county, with the latest front in Aptos at the "great meadow" adjacent to the Polo Grounds Dog Park at 2255 Huntington Ave.

"We want places where our dogs can be off-leash," says Aptos resident David Moore.

Other than the Polo Grounds and Scotts Valley off-leash parks, the options for dog owners are places with limited hours for canines, like the popular Lighthouse Field.

Dogs must be on a leash at the great meadow, an unfenced area with a walkway around the perimeter and trails to a creek. Some dog owners prefer that over the adjacent Polo Grounds, where dogs can go off-leash if they stay within the fence.

Lori Siegmund has been taking her two hounds to the park for the past 10 years and applauds the fenced-in area for off-leash use. However, the great meadow's open space and natural setting make it a better option for other dogs, depending on age, temperament and breed.

That's if it weren't bound by the leash law.

Todd Stosuy, supervising animal services field manager, says the great meadow has been a hot spot for complaints about dogs without a leash, defecating and owners not cleaning up after them.

Since Aug. 19, 2006, animal control approached 98 people at the great meadow, according to statistics made available by Stosuy. Eleven were cited for leash or licensing violations.

John Wallace, park ranger for the city of Santa Cruz, says dogs have prompted similar concerns there, and that a leash is the only way to truly control a dog.

"There's a reason for having leashes on dogs," says Wallace, who patrols 2,000 acres of open space and city parks. "It's for the protection of everybody."

Park officials also note that dogs can be a nuisance to natural habitats and wildlife, if their waste isn't cleaned up.

Still, dog owners maintain, there's a lack of



Dogs gather with their owners at the Polo Grounds Dog Park in Aptos.

open space for dogs in this county, and criminalizing those who let dogs go illegally off-leash is "silly."

Happy Valley resident and dog owner Whitney Wilde says limited dog park hours, such as those set at Lighthouse Field State Beach in Santa Cruz, are not enough.

The state's decision to close Lighthouse Field for off-leash access in November has dog lovers searching for options. Some possibilities include Grant Street, Ocean View and Derby Street parks in the city of Santa Cruz.

"I understand the anti-dog people not wanting it in their backyard," Wilde said. "But it needs to be somewhere."

Dog owners plan to voice their concerns at the next county Parks and Recreation Commission meeting Monday at 7:15 p.m., 701 Ocean St., fifth floor of the county building.

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*Shaminder Dulai
Sentinel photos*

Margaret Moore walks her dogs in Aptos, where some are pushing for off-leash privileges at the 'great meadow.'