



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Live Oak dog owners are pushing for their own off-leash beach near Corcoran Lagoon.

Off-leash dog debate heats up in Live Oak

Proposal sparks community engagement

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LIVE OAK — Every week for two years, Supervisor John Leopold said he's received emails, calls, letters and visits about off-leash dogs on the beach, from both sides.

One side calls off-leash dog use a way of life; the other, a threat to public safety, the environment and other dogs.

A debate about retaining leash laws at Corcoran Lagoon beach has spurred a fair share of engagement in the unincorporated community: A nearly 4,000 signature off-leash petition, the formation of two opposing community groups and seven well-attended public meetings since April 2012.

Leopold said he knew from the beginning the process would take time.

"When you're talking about a change as significant as this, you don't want to do that quickly," Leopold said. "You want a public process where everyone can be heard."

The Sentinel staff chose off-leash dogs as a top Newsmaker for 2013.

The most recent development was an October county Parks and Recreation Commission decision to take no action on an off-leash proposal. Instead, Parks and Recreation staff were tasked with identifying county land for both fenced and unfenced off-leash use and criteria for future off-leash proposals. Staff are expected to present their findings in April.

The decision followed a series of working group meetings between opposing sides, moderated by commissioners Jim Lang and Mariah Roberts.

"We didn't accomplish anything," said Lang, regarding the process and resulting decision.

People will continue to take off-leash dogs to Corcoran Lagoon beach regardless of the law, as they have for years, he said.

The beach became the focus of debate in January 2012 after Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter officers began issuing citations for off-leash use.

"People were kind of shocked," said Ted Coopman, spokesman for Live Oak Off Leash Advocates, which issued the off-leash proposal. "We thought this was a cultural practice that we had, and people saw that as an attack on our community."

Todd Stosuy, field manager for Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter, said he's received complaints about off-leash dogs at the beach for years but didn't have enough staffing to enforce the law until January 2012. Officers have issued nearly 350 off-leash citations at county beaches

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since then.

But with three officers on foot and the beach's size, Stosuy said he sees little impact from the citations.

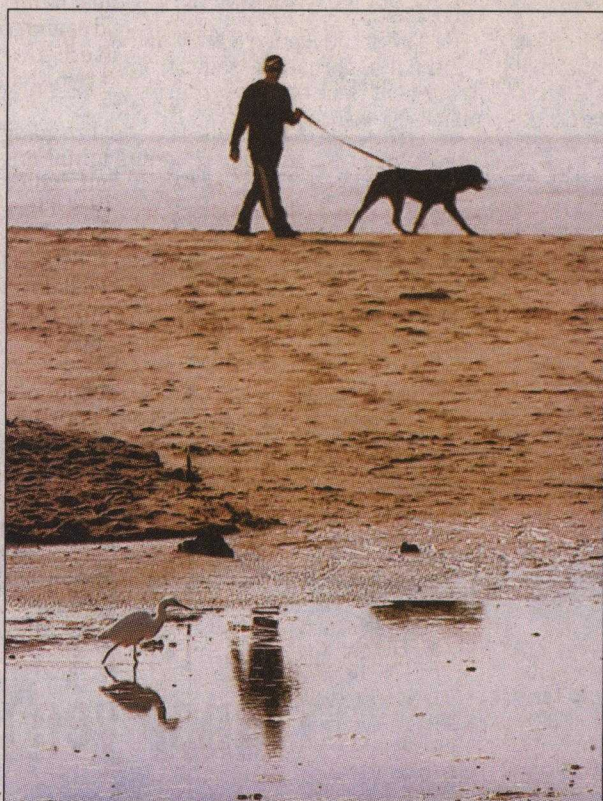
"No matter what time of day we went, there were constantly people with dogs off-leash," Stosuy said. "You catch one person and everyone else takes off."

He said when off-leash users see him coming, they sometimes sound a warning air horn or run away to avoid the citation, which escalates from \$25 for the first offense to \$150 and \$250 for subsequent offenses.

Jean Bröcklebank, spokeswoman for Leash Law Advocates of Santa Cruz County, which formed in response to the off-leash proposal, said county jurisdiction and environmental considerations complicate the issue. Much of the land surrounding Corcoran Lagoon beach is either privately owned or part of the Monterey Bay National Sanctuary, which is outside the county's jurisdiction.

If dogs chase balls into the water, they would be in the national sanctuary, she said, adding, "The county property doesn't even reach the shoreline."

Off-leash dogs present a chronic disturbance that keeps birds off the beach, according to Carleton Eyster, Snowy Plover biologist at Point Blue, a bird conservation nonprofit. In the 1990s, the beach housed two nests of the endangered Snowy Plover, but the chicks did not survive, he said.



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A man walks his dog along the beach while an egret hunts in Corcoran Lagoon. Live Oak dog owners are pushing for an off-leash beach there while opponents say migrating shore birds can be harmed.

"Ultimately, it's a city beach and comes with it all the things, dogs and otherwise," Eyster said.

The off-leash proposal requires a series of traffic, noise and environmental reviews, with an estimated cost of \$40,000 to \$60,000, Parks and Recreation staff member Betsey Lynberg said during the summer. That cost could double if an environmental impact review was required.

Given the potential cost and the state of county funding, Commissioner Roberts said at the October meeting

she did not recommend having an off-leash beach, but did support the creation of criteria for future proposals.

Live Oak relies on an ad hoc patchwork of county offices and service agencies to react to the community's needs, she said.

"I think any community, ours included, benefits from having an easy way for citizens to accomplish their goals," said Roberts.

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