

Classes for dogs thrive at new site

Animals
Soquel neighbors
are dog-gone happy

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Just a year ago, popular Santa Cruz-area dog trainer Kitty Fields was a pariah to some of her Soquel neighbors and a pain in the neck to the county planning department.

Today, thanks to a new locale for her dog-training classes, Fields is back in her neighbors' good graces and is carrying on her professional career, which has, she says, helped more than 40,000 pooches learn to sit, stay and heel over the past four decades.

Began school in 1953

Fields, 55, had been training dogs at the family home on Maplethorpe Lane in Soquel and later at her own place down the street since 1953. She has been active on her own and through the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and has produced a videotape to help others learn how to get their dogs to respond to commands.

Planning requirements

Problems arose after Fields failed to meet requirements set by Santa Cruz County planners, who'd gotten an earful from neighbors tired of barking and extra traffic on their rustic lane. Planners told Fields to cut back substantially on the lessons she gave at her house, and she did cut back some, planners said a year ago, but not enough to satisfy either themselves or complaining neighbors.

So, after planners spelled out strict conditions regulating Fields' dog-training operation on Maplethorpe Lane, the well-known tutor of man's best friends and those who own them was offered an opportunity to move her canine classroom to the grounds of a feed and pet-supply store in Santa Cruz. She now teaches six to eight classes a week at that site, according to the general manager of Cali Feed and Pet Supply, at 2801 Soquel Ave. near the Highway 1 overpass.

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"After she'd been down to the county," John Brandt, who manages Cali Feed, said Tuesday, "I called her and told her that corner of the property is all hers. In fact, I told her she can use our warehouse and conference room for lessons if it's cold or rainy."

"She's been teaching here ever since."

"They heard about my problem and called and said, 'Come on down,' " Fields said.

She still gives a few lessons at her home, but not enough to annoy neighbors.

"I teach beginners' lessons three evenings a week," she said Tuesday.

Her Cali classes are held one evening and four mornings each week, she said.

"We're pleased the county made the decision that she can only give five lessons a week at her home," said Jeanette Scott, Fields' next-door neighbor.

"Everyone's much happier," Scott said. "The lessons are no longer a neighborhood problem."

She said cutting back the number of lessons has greatly reduced traffic along Maplethorpe, a privately maintained street. Traffic now is more appropriate for a

Fields said that during her run-in with the county, she received hundreds of letters from friends and supporters and garnered more than 10,000 signatures on petitions urging planners to allow her to continue her classes on Maplethorpe Lane.

Brandt, who acknowledges that having dogs and their devoted owners taking lessons just a stick's throw from the front door of his store has been good for business, calls the deal "a win-win situation."

"Kitty's got a place where she can teach dogs," he said, "and we've put that corner of our property to good use and brought folks here to Cali Feed."

Brandt said he'd had a special interest in having lessons provided for the elderly and for kids who own dogs. He said Fields was more than happy to offer classes for those age groups and their pets.

"Kitty and her lessons are really a community benefit," Brandt said. "We're just happy to help."