

City may cede control of park to state

Lighthouse Field
LEASH LAW, UPGRADES
THREATEN LOCAL HAND
IN LIGHTHOUSE FIELD

By Shanna McCord

MediaNews

Cash-strapped Santa Cruz is set to surrender control of Lighthouse Field to the state, which means dog owners have only eight months longer to let their dogs run free at the popular beach and park. Visitors soon could be forced to pay to park in the area.

SANTA CRUZ

That's the message city leaders are delivering to residents and state leaders.

It's unclear whether they intend to really give up Lighthouse Field or if they are using the threat as a bargaining tactic to win approval for off-leash dogs from the state.

City leaders say they plan to return management of Lighthouse Field State Beach to the state in November because they refuse to stipulate that dogs be leashed at all times — a state requirement — and because the city cannot afford new state disability requirements such as paved trails through the field, city officials said.

The management change, announced in a letter earlier this month to Ruth Coleman, head of the state parks system, would end 30 years of the city's Parks and Recreation Department maintaining the area, including off-leash dog hours that started in 1993. The state has a blanket policy of restricting dogs to leashes in all of its parks, a rule the city hasn't enforced in 14 years.

"This is to let them know what they're proposing won't work for us," Mayor Emily Reilly said about the letter. "I think we need to be firm

about what this community wants. We need a fair arrangement if we're going to operate it."

Overseeing Lighthouse Field costs Santa Cruz more than \$200,000 a year, Reilly said.

City officials say it's not worth their time or money to manage the area for the next 20 years if they have to pay for a number of improvements to comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act and yank the off-leash policy.

State officials, meanwhile, appear reluctant to resume control of a park, located in the city, that hasn't been their concern since 1977.

"We don't feel yet that negotiations are at an end or at a stalemate," state parks spokesman Roy Stearns said. "We're in discussions to seek

alternatives. We know this is a very volatile issue."

Despite the letter from city officials to Coleman, a group of dog enthusiasts known as Friends of Lighthouse Field isn't giving up its fight to keep the area open to off-leash dogs. Zee Zaballos, who regularly visits the beach and field with her dog, said the countywide group of 2,800 residents is in the midst of a letter-writing campaign to city and state officials to keep Lighthouse Field State Beach the way it is.

She said at least 1,500 letters have been written during the past month to state leaders Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, and Bobby Shriver, head of the state Parks Commission and brother-in-law of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

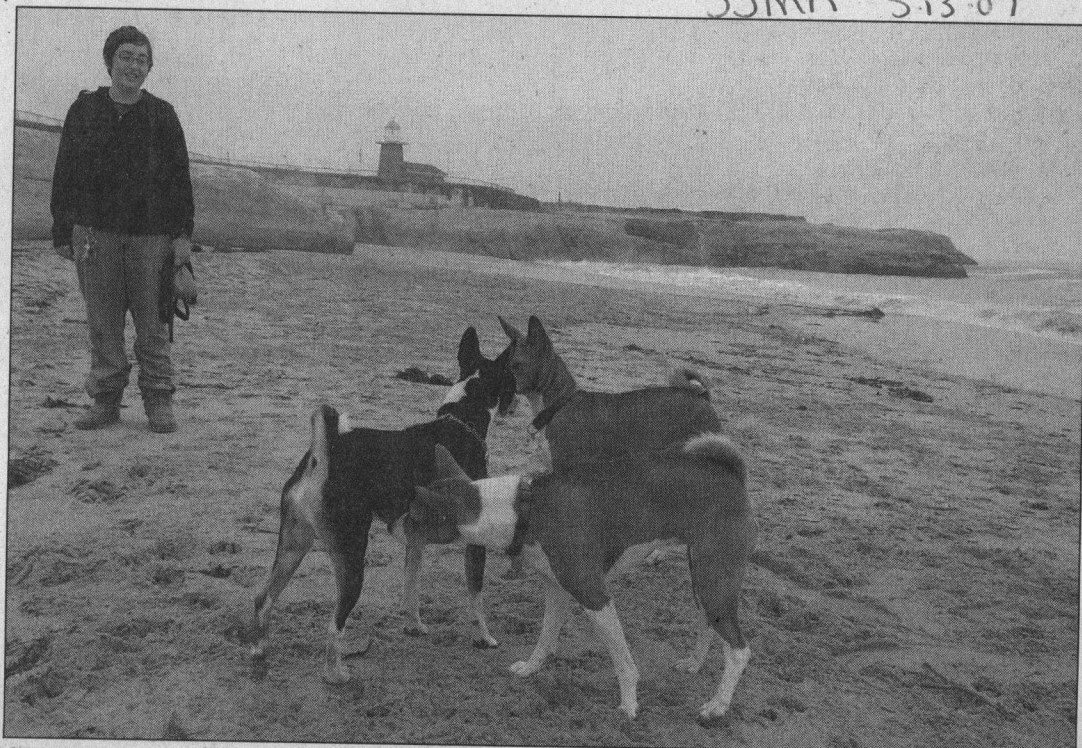
"This is bigger than just dogs off leash," Zaballos said. "The pressure's not off. It's not over by a long shot."

Others fear that state control also would mean parking and use fees for the area, as is common at nearly all state parks.

Off-leash dogs at Lighthouse Field State Beach have been controversial for years, prompting a lawsuit against the city in 2005 by a group that alleged loose dogs pose severe threats to people and the park environment. The lawsuit forced the city to either perform an environmental study of leash-free dogs or require all dogs to be leashed.

The city has yet to do either.

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KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

Dogs frolic on the beach near Lighthouse Field in Santa Cruz. A state law requiring all dogs at state parks be leashed is one factor that has the city saying they will return control of the park to the state.