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N NEWS



State Jurisdiction Unleashed

'It' might be over for dogs at Its Beach | **Chris J. Magyar**

Animals
On Saturday, Nov. 18, neighbors, dog lovers and local politicians gathered at the edge of the cliff leading down to Its Beach, showing support for one of the more unusual dog parks in the country. Since 1993, the walled-in beach at the base of Lighthouse Field has been open to off-leash dog recreation in the mornings until 10 a.m., and from 4 p.m. until sundown every evening.

The trouble is, when the City of Santa Cruz decided to initiate this policy as the operator of the state beach, no environmental review was completed. When this anomaly was brought to the attention of the California State Parks Department, notice was given to the city that dogs would have to be re-leashed as of Nov. 2007, when a long-standing management agreement between the two is set to expire.

Zee Zaballos is the spokesperson for Friends of Lighthouse Field, the organizer of the Saturday dog rally. "A lot of people think that it's a done deal, and it's not. The state decision was done without any community input at all. Not only is this a leash issue—what's at stake is the reversion of the beach to state management.

"Far beyond the dog issue," Zaballos continues, "there could be paid parking, which could impact events like the O'Neill Cold Water Classic. We want this park to stay under local management. Over the last 30 years, this place has been a community park. In fact, it was the community that prevented a conference center from being built here. Now, the community is coming out again."

Mayor Cynthia Mathews, one of several city council members attending the event, says that the issue isn't completely one-sided. "Obviously Friends of Lighthouse Field is committed to preserving off-leash dog use, but there are other local residents who have made it very clear they're going to oppose it, as they have in the past, so it's not an easy issue to resolve."

There is a possibility that state management would not necessarily preclude off-leash dog use. "There will be discussions between us and the local superintendent, the city, and the citizens," says State Parks spokesperson Roy Stearns. While he says none of those discussions are planned yet, they are "part of what we do on a normal basis."

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Also, the late State Assemblyman Mike Gordon pushed through a bill in 2005 to establish a one-year evaluation of off-leash dog beach recreation on state beaches, which would be overseen by Parks and Recreation and the California Coastal Commission. The study, conducted by the California Research Bureau, found that the common concerns—"poop, bites, liability, noise, and wildlife"—vary from place to place, especially in regard to plant and animal wildlife. The study found that concerns of unattended dog waste were difficult to address compared to other sources of water pollution. The bill calls for a pilot program at one state beach.

Santa Cruz is doing its own studies as well. According to Mathews, "At this point, we're looking at any variety of scenarios for the future." The city has been doing an environmental review of off-leash dog activities at four city parks, in preparation of the possible closure of Its Beach. While dog owners naturally welcome more recreational space, there is a sense that city parks are not the solution. Unlike traditional dog parks, where a chain-link fence surrounds a beaten dirt lot, an everyday park takes the risk of dogs romping around playground equipment and nearby streets. Its Beach provides a naturally-contained area for dogs and owners to socialize under the open sky.

Zaballos also worries about what would happen to Lighthouse Field in general if the hundreds of dog owners who use the park every week started going to some of the other proposed off-leash areas the city is testing. "The park is currently under a very watchful eye. The community does park clean-ups and stewardships. Without the vital community use that's there, the park could deteriorate and we could see an increase of drug use or other illegal activities."

Friends of Lighthouse Field is showing confidence in its ability to maintain the off-leash policy. It recently raised \$2,000 to purchase and install a new water fountain for people—and dogs. Zaballos says, "I think our city is recognizing that we are a really good model for what community ownership means. We want to see Lighthouse Field as a multi-use area for everyone to enjoy."

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