



**SHORT LEASH** Chibo (right) shows his owner, Michael Tilson the finer points of being unleashed at Lighthouse Field.

an environmental impact report (EIR), it did say the city's general plan should have included one nonetheless.

More recently, an attorney for the Department of Parks and Recreation sent the city a letter serving notice that dogs would be required to be leashed at Lighthouse Field and Its Beach by Nov. 15, 2007. The state owns the land and the city maintains it, an agreement that has been in place since 1977.

A group calling itself the Lighthouse Field Beach Rescue, which is opposed to free-range dogs in the park, have been sparring with Friends of Lighthouse Field, an informal neighborhood organization that is fighting to keep the off-leash policy. Last year, the Lighthouse Field Beach Rescue sued the city for not doing an environmental impact report on the effects of having unleashed dogs in the park. The Santa Cruz Superior Court ruled against the group so they appealed the decision to a higher court and won a ruling in their favor.

"Our concern is that the (unleashed dog) use is basically incompatible with the area," says Grant Weseman, a Santa Cruz firefighter and member of the Lighthouse Field Beach Rescue. "You'd be lucky if you saw anyone down at Its Beach who doesn't have a dog. It's just so unpleasant. Safety-wise, when you have Pit Bulls and Rottweilers and other dogs that may have received little or no training and have the capability of inflicting serious injury or even death as has been noted in San Francisco and many other places, it's simply not right." In his work as a fireman, he says he's seen numerous altercations between dogs and people, and has had negative personal experiences with dogs at both Its Beach and the Lighthouse Field including an incident in which a speeding dog on the hunt for a tennis ball plowed down his then 8-year-old daughter.

"It's not a dog issue," says Tilson, a Friends of the Lighthouse Field member. At his side is Chibo, a German Wired Hair Pointer who looks on with interest at a circle of frenetic dogs in the dry grass. "It's a people-with-dogs issue. It's a quality-of-life issue. Loss of this space would be a severe quality-of-life loss to me. I know I'm speaking for a lot of people who feel just like me."

There are indeed a lot of people, and a lot of dogs at Lighthouse Field. Tilson says the field is one of the few places within the city limits that allow dogs off-leash, a space he says represents only 2 percent of the public land that is designated for off-leash use. "Dogs need socialization and you'll find that dogs are less aggressive when they've been socialized. So it's good for the dogs and it's good for me to be out here. It's part of my day that I enjoy. People use the term quality of life, and it's true. It's a huge part of their day. But we can't figure out why a few people want to drive us out."

Another one of those people who would like to see the dogs reigned in is chair of the Santa Cruz Group of the Sierra Club, Aldo Giacchino. Though the Sierra Club didn't take part in the lawsuit to stop the un-leashed dogs, he says they support an environmental impact study. "The city failed, and in fact doggedly refused to conduct the study," he says. "We are lacking the scientific evaluation of what the actual impact is."

Giacchino says the dogs' impact is pronounced, tearing up the ground and defecating all over the place, not to mention the problems they create for the birds. He lives near the park and says he feels very uncomfortable going there with his grandchildren. "The notion of having these dogs run amok is troublesome. If it was one dog it would not be a problem. It's the multitude of dogs. There are many people that feel intimidated by these big dogs running around the park."

Tilson, though, sees it differently. "I have never seen

## A Dog Day Afternoon

The state unleashes a 'dogmatic' ruling about unleashed canines at Lighthouse Field and Its Beach.

But dog lovers say they aren't giving up. | by Bruce Willey

For the last seven years Michael Tilson and Chibo have been coming to Lighthouse Field seven days a week. There, between the sanctioned off-leash hours of 4 to 6 p.m., dogs meet nose to tail and back to nose again, while people meet each other, known mostly by the names of the dogs they keep. It's a ritual where both human and dog can escape the confines of their lives and roam the state park,

unfettered by vinyl office chairs and leather leashes.

But that is almost certain to change in exactly two years from this month when the dogs will have to go back on the leash when they are in the park. Recently, a state appellate court ruled that the City of Santa Cruz didn't properly recognize the potential environmental impacts of allowing unleashed dogs in Lighthouse Field. Though the ruling didn't say the city was required to do



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a dog act aggressively to a person,” he says. “I’m not saying it’s not possible, I’m not saying it’s never happened ever, but in 2,000 visits I’ve never seen it. And I’ve never seen a dog catch a bird, and anyone who is seen not picking up after their dog gets a severe talking to, and they get socialized to do the right thing.”

Yet despite the appeals court ruling and the state’s letter to the city mandating a leash law in the park, Tilson says the Friends of Lighthouse Field are not giving up hope and plan to fight the decision. In particular they say the appeals court ruling didn’t necessarily ban un-leashed dogs in the park, and that the state’s decision was made without any public comment. “I think it will be more a political issue rather than a legal issue,” he says. “The lawsuit is simply a lever to push the city around.”

But Dannette Shoemaker, director of the City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation and a dog owner herself, isn’t as optimistic because the state actually owns the property even though the city pays \$250,000 a year for its upkeep. “Whatever we end up doing, we want to make sure it sticks,” she says. “We have not gotten a firm legal opinion from the city attorney on whether or not he would recommend a full-on EIR in order to address the dogs off-leash.”

She says an EIR to study the effects of the dogs would cost up to \$100,000, money the cash-strapped city doesn’t have. City attorney John Barrisone could not be reached for comment.

Weseman, for one, thinks that even if the city did an EIR, it would find that unleashed dogs are detrimental to both the environment and the people who come to the area without dogs. “This is the crown jewel of Santa Cruz City parkland, says Weseman. “I think the people on the City Council and these dog groups simply look at it as ‘that would be a good toilet for my dog.’ This is the classic ‘casting pearls before swine’ thing. They could go and take the other 98 percent of the public land and find a place that would lend itself to off-leash use. Go ahead. But these beaches have been used for generations of Santa Cruzans, students and visitors from around the world who come to see this pinnacle of our parkland, our interface with the environment, the Pacific Ocean, the Monterey Bay.”

And that’s exactly what the Parks and Recreation intends to do. Shoemaker says she’ll be looking for other potential sites in the next few months and will bring these evaluations to the public sometime in February or March of next year. “I want to make sure we do our homework and not implement something that’s not going to work.”

Back at Lighthouse Field the sun sets and a full moon replaces it in the opposite side of the sky. The dogs go back on the leash and their owners prepare to leave the park; people like Steve Heinen and his dog Ginger who come here five nights a week.

“We’re supposed to be so liberal as a city, and sometimes I think when you get so far one way you end up being conservative,” he says of the recent news regarding dogs off-leash. “It’s full circle. People are just uptight sometimes. Sure, if you closed this park it would go back to a more un-shepherded state. But when a group gets together and utilizes it they also maintain it, they police it themselves and usually it ends up being a nicer place. I suspect this is another move in the chess game battle for this park. There have been many decisions made, this way and that, and this current one is two years away. Who knows what will happen.”