

Judge's decision keeps dogs leashed



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Its Beach is included in the latest ruling prohibiting off-leash dogs.

Still no deal with state and city for Lighthouse Field

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SANTA CRUZ — Lighthouse Field State Beach, a popular place where dogs once ran free, is set to stay in state hands without the leash law being lifted any time soon.

But pet owners, refusing to give up the fight for off-leash dogs on the beach, want to establish a nonprofit dedicated to raising money to help the city purchase and maintain the state park.

Negotiations between city and state officials for Santa Cruz to buy the 37-acre park on West Cliff

Drive haven't budged since the last bargaining meeting in December. However, negotiations will continue, Mayor Ryan Coonerty said Tuesday.

Meanwhile, a Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge threw out a lawsuit last week by Friends of Lighthouse Field — a community group of hundreds of dog owners — that demanded the state Department of Parks study the environmental impacts of requiring leashed dogs at all hours.

The community group alleges, without dogs and their owners regularly hanging out, the park's

condition will quickly deteriorate into an area attractive for homeless camping, drug deals and prostitution.

Mike Tilson, a member of the group that has heavily lobbied state and city parks officials during the past couple of years to preserve the off-leash hours, said the group will appeal Judge Paul Burdick's decision.

"The judge said enforcement of leash restrictions is not a discretionary action. It means the lawsuit is over," said Brad Torgan, general

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counsel for State Parks. "The state has a duty to enforce the leash laws at state parks and beaches. This not a [California Environmental Quality Act] project."

State Parks took back control of Lighthouse Field State Beach, including Its Beach, in November when a 30-year management contract with the city Parks and Recreation Department ended.

During the city's management tenure, a new rule was made to allow dogs without leashes before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m. daily, something not permitted at state parks.

The state essentially ignored the off-leash dogs until Santa Cruz lost a lawsuit in 2005 by local residents opposed to free-roaming dogs on public property. The lawsuit sought a study of the environmental impacts associated with the off-leash freedom. The state then told city officials they would have to nix the off-leash policy. Instead of enforce state law, the city opted to give back the park to the state when the contract ended in November.

A purchase offer of \$1 million with no interest over 40 years was made to State Parks from Santa

Cruz officials in November. The state rejected the offer and negotiations went back and forth for about a month to no avail. State Parks officials have declined to disclose their counteroffer.

Some city leaders are hopeful a deal will be struck.

"There's still a difference between what the city has to offer and what the state is willing to sell the property for," Coonerty said.

"We're still talking."

Coonerty welcomes the creation of a nonprofit in support of the city's possible ownership of Lighthouse Field State Beach.

"The city is always happy to have support from community groups," he said. "At the end of the day, Lighthouse Field is a community resource."

In the meantime, pet owners caught without a leash at Light-



A woman wrestles her dog away from a gopher hole in Lighthouse State Park on Tuesday. Friends of Lighthouse Field were dealt a blow by a local judge who threw out their suit against the state.

Dan Coyro/
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house Field State Beach will be given warnings until March as part of a transitional grace period, State Parks spokesman Roy Stearns said.

"There's no discretion to not enforce the law," Stearns said. "There is discretion in manner of enforcement."

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