

Leash law takes effect

Dogs must remain on-leash at all times at Lighthouse Field

By SHANNA McCORD
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SANTA CRUZ — Gone are the days of dogs chasing sticks and following tennis balls into the waves at Lighthouse Field and Its Beach — at least temporarily.

The 30-year contract that allowed the city Parks and Recreation Department to oversee the state-owned park on West Cliff Drive expired Thursday, which puts the land back into state hands and ends the off-leash dog hours started by the city in 1993. The city's initial bid to buy the park was rejected by State Parks officials.

"We deny that it's the end of the off-leash tradition at Lighthouse Field and Its Beach," said Mike Tilson, a Westside resident who takes Cibo, his German wire-haired pointer to the beach daily. "We are doing everything in our power to see that the off-leash tradition continues."

City leaders declined to renew the management contract for Lighthouse Field State Beach because the state would have forced the city to follow the statewide policy that requires dogs at all state parks and beaches be on a leash.

Not willing to enforce state rules, city officials — under pressure from hundreds of local dog owners like Tilson — offered to purchase the 37-acre park in September for \$1 million as a way

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Leashed!

As of today, all dogs at Lighthouse Field State Beach, which includes Lighthouse Field and Its Beach, must be on-leash. State parks officials say they will give out warnings rather than tickets during a four-month grace period to educate dog owners about the change in the leash rules.

The 30-year contract that allowed the city Parks and Recreation Department to oversee the state-owned park expired Thursday. The city had allowed dogs to be off-leash since 1993.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

All dogs must be leashed at Lighthouse Field and Its Beach beginning today when California State Parks rangers take over patrolling Santa Cruz's two most popular dog areas. Diane Porter keeps her dog Kola leashed in Lighthouse Field Thursday.

Leash

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to retain control and allow free roaming dogs.

State Parks officials rejected the bid and presented a counteroffer, which is still being negotiated, according to State Parks spokesman Roy Stearns.

"We came back with a counteroffer and the city is examining that," Stearns said. "We're still hopeful the negotiations will be fruitful. We've always believed this park is more in keeping with a local park."

City leaders declined to comment on details of the purchase negotiations.

Meanwhile, dog owners passionate about keeping the area as a place their pets can run around are disgruntled with the lack of action between the city and state to settle the issue.

Friends of Lighthouse Field, a group of hundreds of dog owners countywide who have held ral-

lies and petitioned city and state leaders, filed a lawsuit Thursday against the state in Santa Cruz County Superior Court alleging negative impacts to the environment are on the horizon when dog owners are no longer regular visitors to the area.

According to Tilson, the lawsuit alleges public safety and quality of life around Lighthouse Field State Beach will severely diminish without people walking their dogs because they expect to see a spike in illegal camping and drug use at the park.

The lawsuit also claims traffic to other areas of the city will increase as dog owners go looking for new spots to take their pooches.

"Community use of Lighthouse Field provides a net environmental benefit," Tilson said. "Their presence brings cultural, social and public safety benefits. Attempting to remove them is clearly a big negative."

Friends of Lighthouse Field hired Fresno attorney Kathleen Clack, an expert in the California Environmental Quality Act, to

fight its case.

"We really hate to be in this position to take this legal action," Westside resident and dog owner Zee Zaballos said. "But we have no choice. We have to protect the community."

Critics of the off-leash dog hours, few in number, say the city must perform an environmental study before continuing the policy. They say dogs harm the environment when their poop is not picked up and native wildlife are scared away by barking.

State Parks officials say they will grant a four-month grace period to educate dog owners about the change in the leash rules. Only warnings, no tickets, will be given during that time, Stearns said. Tickets run about \$100.

"We will be doing our best to be a good neighbor during this transition period so we can move this property back to state rules and policies," he said. "We're not going to be heavy-handed in this."

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