

Fight over dogs on the beach heats up

County panel forms committee to study controversial issue

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LIVE OAK — Tongues were wagging and fur was flying Monday night as the Santa Cruz County Parks and Recreation Commission met to consider one of the weightier issues to come before it in years — off-leash dog beaches.

About 120 people packed a room at the Simpkins Family Swim Center for a lively debate that lasted more than two hours. A line of people spoke, defending or criticizing a proposal to allow dogs to roam free during morning and evening hours at a popular Mid-County beach.

Ultimately, the commission postponed a recommendation, clearly avoiding a contentious issue. The panel said the issue was more complex than they were ready to take on and voted to create an eight-member ad hoc committee, including two commissioners and three from opposing sides, to examine the debate further.

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DOGS

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"Who owns what on the beach?" Commissioner Kate Minott said. "It's more complicated than you'd think."

That did not sit well with some who stuck around for the debate.

"With all due respect this has been going for 18 months. Do you have a timeline?" one off-leash supporter called out.

"I don't think anyone wants to make a knee-jerk reaction," said Commissioner Steven Bennett, who chairs the agency. The commission suggested a three-month timeline.

Some members of the audience who spoke on opposite sides of the issue live near each other.

"Dogs don't belong running loose on beaches. Their presence completely compromises the safety of the public and the wildlife," said Georgina Monahan, who has lived at Corcoran Lagoon for 26 years but no longer walks along the beach due to dogs running free. "Dogs may come to the beach on leash. That's a privilege, and that's enough."

But dog lovers, who pushed for the proposal after a crackdown on off-leash dogs, said dogs and their owners need a place to roam free,

even during limited hours. Most dog owners are responsible, they said, adding that safety concerns are overblown.

"Things happen everywhere. We have accidents on the highway and we don't quit driving," said Monte McDonald, who lives near the beach and suggested a pilot program as a compromise. "We are citizens of this county. This is our resource. Listen to us and give us a chance."

DOGS ALWAYS CONTROVERSIAL

At an estimated 51,000, there are nearly as many dogs in Santa Cruz County as there are children, and dog owners often treat their charges with the same level of care.

The debate has focused on Live Oak beaches because of what seems to be a concentration of owners there and a paucity of off-leash areas. Dog owners collected 3,900 signatures to support their proposal to open up the beach between 20th Avenue and Moran Lake, while opponents cite public safety and environmental issues in opposing the idea.

It has not always been a friendly debate. When a group called Live Oak Off-Leash Advocates, or LOOLA, adopted one of the potential beaches through the nonprofit Save Our Shores, its signs were vandalized. And the group is fuming, believing their views aren't get-

ting a fair shake because of a small minority of poorly behaved dogs and owners.

"You can't damn an entire user group for a very small percentage of people who may be acting out or acting badly," said Ted Coopman, LOOLA spokesman.

Until a few years ago, there were virtually no fenced or partially fenced off-leash areas, though Aptos' Polo Grounds, Scotts Valley's Sky Park and Santa Cruz' University Terrace Park now have them.

In addition, the city of Santa Cruz allows off-leash dogs during daylight at DeLaveaga Park, Ocean View Park and elsewhere, and at Mitchell's Cove before 10 a.m. and after 4 p.m. Dogs are also found roaming free on local state beaches such as Its Beach, though not always without controversy.

Recently, a 5-year-old boy was seriously injured in Rio del Mar when it was attacked by a dog that happened to be under care of an Animal Shelter volunteer. The dog was euthanized and dog supporters said the event is a rarity, but the episode has given opponents of off-leash beaches a rallying point.

"To the family and the 5-year-old boy who was hospitalized, it may not matter whether or not other attacks ever made front-page news," said Jean Brocklebank, of

the group Leash Law Advocates of Santa Cruz County.

Leash law advocates said they've felt threatened by dogs, and one man said he'd been bitten three times. They said they have trouble getting owners pay attention to and control their dogs, and that there are more vicious dogs on the beach.

"There's only one responsible action you can take tonight as a board. You can recommend that county leash laws remain unchanged, and you can request additional enforcement to protect public safety," said Ian Walton, who lives near 26th Avenue. Off-leash supporters said their proposal was very modest, consuming a very small percentage of beach hours available throughout the county. They said communities in San Diego, Huntington Beach, Tiburon, Carmel, San Francisco and more all offer off-leash beaches.

Along with her husband, area resident Lynn Simpson endowed one of three benches at 26th Avenue. She is a dog owner who supports allowing dogs on the beach, but she said the debate is getting out of control.

"In our case, my husband, our dog and I have been anonymously threatened with physical harm," Simpson said, holding copies of the threatening letter. "My hope is we can all come to (an agreement) in

a civil manner."

The county has raised several issues with off-leash access, including potential damage to endangered species and the National Marine Sanctuary, though it cited no studies. It also raised legal concerns, saying it may have to pay up to \$1 million before insurance begins to cover any settlements.

County staff even raised the possibility that the California Coastal Commission would have to get involved, though the group, which has some jurisdiction over beach use, has no specific dog policy. And, staff continued, if the county were forced to draw up an environmental impact report, it could cost up to \$100,000.

But the county did say additional off-leash areas parks could be considered in existing county parks, including in Soquel's Anna Jean Cummings Park and Live Oak's Brommer Park.

Dog owners say none of the alternatives, however, offer the same experience to both a dog and its owner as a beach. Jerry Kay, who said people need to learn to share more, said the beach experience is unique.

"Why do we have to have our dogs off-leash on the beach?" Kay said. "It's because of mental health really, and our dogs' mental health."