

Shelter: Loosen leash laws

Board recommends more areas for dogs to roam free, but leaves details up to cities, county



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL PHOTOS

Devon Obert takes her dog Sea Bass for his daily romp on 20th Avenue Beach with her children, Jared, 4, and Jaiden, 6, on Monday.

Animals Debate stirs passions on both sides

By KIMBERLY WHITE

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LIVE OAK — Santa Cruz County could soon go to the dogs — in a way.

The board of directors for the county Animal Shelter met late Monday afternoon, with plans to come up with a recommendation on an off-leash ordinance that those on both sides of the issue could live with. In a unanimous vote, the board agreed simply to recommend creating more off-leash areas, enclosed, for safety reasons, by fencing. But what the individual cities and unincorporated areas do with that recommendation is up to them.

"It's a complicated issue and more information needs to be gathered," said Tina Shull, representing the city of Santa Cruz. "This has to be done well and done right," with a particular emphasis on public safety.

The issue first arose in January,



A Yorkshire terrier named Vanessa gets an on-leash walk along a Live Oak beach on Monday.

when officials began more heavily enforcing the already existing leash laws at unincorporated parks and beaches. Of particular concern were the beaches in Live Oak, where dog owners for years have ignored the leash law and allowed their four-legged friends to have

free rein.

Proponents of the laws say those residents are not only breaking the law, but that the dogs harass families with children and the wildlife. But opponents say their furry family members need places to run free, and that the actions of

a few bad apples shouldn't ruin it for everyone.

But changing the laws involves land-use issues and detailed environmental studies. The board has neither the knowledge nor resources to complete that work, and even if it did, it does not have the authority to make any changes, said Melanie Sobel, the Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter's general manager.

But "there does need to be more areas for people with off-leash pets," she said, adding she would help officials identify possible locations.

During the nearly hourlong public comment period that followed, residents on both sides of the issue spoke up. Opponents, many of them homeowners in the Pleasure Point area, said they feel threatened by some dogs' behavior, and that designating off-leash hours on beaches there would effectively close the beaches off to everyone else during that time slot.

Off-leash hours are "not com-



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Live Oak beaches are clearly marked as on-leash areas — at least for now.

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patible with the general public or wildlife,” Santa Cruz resident Peggy Pollard said, adding such a designation would only serve to draw dog owners from elsewhere.

But off-leash supporters, while acknowledging not everyone follows the rules, reiterated their belief that dog

owners are responsible stewards who police themselves, and that their dogs need more places to roam leash-free. David Neaves, a Live Oak resident and member of Live Oak Off Leash Advocates, owns a water dog that he said “needs to swim every day,” and “he can’t do that on a leash.”

“Most of the on-leash advocates live right there, above the beach, and consider it their neighborhood,” he said. “A fair compromise would be

off-leash hours early, when these people aren’t down there — I never see them down there then, and I never see them picking up trash — and late, when they’re also not down there.”

Live Oak Off Leash Advocates has been circulating an online petition that calls for off-leash hours from 20th Avenue to Moran Lake Beach from sunrise to 10 a.m., and after 4 p.m. As of 6 p.m. Monday, it had more than 1,057 sig-

natures. The group hopes get an ordinance passed similar to one now in effect at Mitchell’s Cove off West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz, where dogs are allowed off leash from sunrise to 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. to sunset.

To view a list of the county’s dog parks, go to <http://www.santacruzspca.org/dogparks.html>.

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