

# Plan or ploy? Santa Cruz tells state to take over Lighthouse Field



Shaminder Dulai/Sentinel photos

Charis Young throws a block of wood into the water for a game of fetch at Its Beach on Monday. If the city were to turn over management of the beach and nearby Lighthouse Field to the state, dogs would likely not be allowed off leash.

## DISPUTE INVOLVES OFF-LEASH DOGS, PATH IMPROVEMENTS

By SHANNA McCORD  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Cash-strapped Santa Cruz is set to surrender control of Lighthouse Field to the state, which means dog owners have only eight months longer to let their dogs run free at the popular beach and park, and that visitors soon could be forced to pay to park in the area.

That's the message city leaders are delivering to residents and state leaders.

It's unclear whether they intend to really give up Lighthouse Field or if they are using the threat as a bargaining tactic to win approval for off-leash dogs from the state.

City leaders say they plan to return management of Lighthouse Field State Beach to State Parks in November because they refuse to require dogs be leashed at all times — a state requirement — and because the city cannot afford new state



disability requirements such as paved trails through the field, city officials said.

The management change, announced in a letter earlier this month to Ruth Coleman, head of State Parks, would end 30 years of the city Parks and Recreation Department maintaining the area, including off-leash dog hours that started in 1993. The state has a blanket policy of restricting dogs to leashes in all state parks, which the

city hasn't enforced in 14 years.

"This is to let them know what they're proposing won't work for us," Mayor Emily Reilly said about the letter. "I think we need to be firm about what this community wants. We need a fair arrangement if we're going to operate it."

Overseeing Lighthouse Field costs Santa Cruz more than \$200,000 annually, Reilly said.

Pet owners have urged the city to keep Its Beach open to off-leash dogs, but some residents say that's dangerous not only for people but for the environment.

City officials say it's not worth their time or money to manage the area for the next 20 years if they have to pay for a number of improvements to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and yank the off-leash policy.

State officials, meanwhile, appear reluctant to resume control of a park, located in the city, that hasn't been their concern since 1977.

"We don't feel yet that negotiations are at an end or at a stalemate," State Parks spokesman Roy Stearns said. "We're in discussions to seek alternatives. We know this is a very volatile issue."

## Dogs

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Despite the letter from city officials to Coleman, a group of dog enthusiasts known as Friends of Lighthouse Field isn't giving up its fight to keep the area open to off-leash dogs. Zee Zaballos, a Westside resident who regularly visits the beach and field with her dog, said the countywide group of 2,800 residents is amid a letter-writing campaign to city and state officials to keep Lighthouse Field State Beach the way it is.

She said at least 1,500 letters have been written during the past month to state leaders Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, and Bobby Shriver, head of the state Parks Commission and brother-in-law of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"This is bigger than just dogs off leash," Zaballos said. "The pressure's not off. It's not over by a long shot."

Others fear that state control also would mean parking and use fees for the area, as is common at nearly all state parks.

Off-leash dogs at Lighthouse Field State Beach have been controversial for years, prompting a lawsuit against the city in 2005 by a group that alleged off-leash dogs pose severe threats to people and the park. The lawsuit forced the city to either perform an environmental study of leash-free dogs or

### If You Go

**WHAT:** Forum for the community to hear from city and state officials about future of Lighthouse Field State Beach.

**WHEN:** 6:30-8 p.m., April 7.

**WHERE:** Louden Nelson Center, 301 Center St., Santa Cruz.

**CONTACT:** 425-4744.

require all dogs to be leashed.

The city has yet to do either. Council members have been unwilling to pay for an environmental study with future control of the area uncertain.

Off-leash dog foes praised the city's apparent decision to return the land to state control.

"That's great," Grant Weseman said. "The city proved itself incapable of following the law. It's no secret that if you let dogs run loose with people, someone will get bit."

The Santa Cruz County Parks Department had contributed about 25 percent of the cost to maintain Lighthouse Field State Beach during the past few decades. However, the county announced last year that come November funding would stop.

"The council said we don't have the human resources and we don't have the financial resources to keep doing this," City Attorney John Barisone said. "We wanted to give the state as much notice as possible about our decision."

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Shaminder Dulai/Sentinel

Evan Lohr watches the ocean for a suitable wave at Its Beach on Monday. The city allows pet owners to let their dogs run off leash at the beach after 4 p.m.