



County of Santa Cruz

PARKS, OPEN SPACE, AND CULTURAL SERVICES

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AGENDA: December 15, 2014

December 10, 2014

PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION
979 17th Avenue
Santa Cruz, CA 95062

SUBJECT: REPORT ON OFF-LEASH DOGS AREAS

Members of the Parks and Recreation Commission:

On October 21, 2013, your Commission considered a report on a proposal from Live Oak Off-Leash Advocates (LOOLA) to allow dogs off-leash on a County-owned beach between 20th Avenue and Corcoran Lagoon between sunrise to sunset daily. At that time staff was directed to prepare initial criteria for off-leash dog areas and an initial review of the County parks and beach property inventory to identify possible opportunities for fenced and unfenced off-leash dog areas in County parks, and report back to the Commission.

Background and Introduction

In 2013, Supervisor John Leopold requested the Parks Division of the Department of Public Works review a proposal from the group Live Oak Off Leash Advocates (LOOLA) to allow dogs off-leash between sunrise and 10 A.M. and 4 P.M. and sunset on Live Oak beaches between 20th Avenue and Moran Lake, a counter-proposal to retain existing leash laws, and actions taken by the Animal Services Authority Board regarding the LOOLA proposal. The Parks and Recreation Commission first considered the proposals at a Commission meeting held on June 10, 2013. The Commission formed a committee of community representatives and two Commissioners. The committee met three times and reported back to the Commission on October 21, 2013. Attachment 1 to this report includes the previous reports to your Commission including information regarding existing regulations, enforcement, and issues related to consideration of a change in leash laws.

Dogs on-leash are welcome in all Santa Cruz County parks and beaches with the exception of Quail Hollow Ranch where dogs are not permitted in sensitive habitat areas and trails located beyond the Quail Hollow ranch house and barns, and Scott Creek Beach because of sensitive habitat and Snowy Plover nesting areas. In addition Santa Cruz County parks have three parks where dogs are permitted to run and play off-leash in fenced enclosures. These include: Chanticleer Avenue Park, Polo Grounds Park, and Pinto Lake Park.

This report will consider criteria for locating and design of additional fenced off-leash dog areas, discuss the concept of shared-use areas, and report on the results of a review of the County park and beach inventory.

Criteria for Off-Leash Dog Areas

Santa Cruz County Parks are designed and managed to meet a wide range of recreational needs to serve our diverse community. Existing County parks and beaches are heavily used with a variety of activities occurring in a park or on a beach at any given time. County parks typically provide specific areas for active play such as playgrounds, athletic fields for soccer and baseball, and courts for tennis and basketball. Passive uses such as walking, picnicking, nature watching are accommodated separately from active uses. Because off-leash dog behavior can and does disturb and displace other park and beach users Santa Cruz County ordinances require dogs to be on-leash in parks and beaches unless in a fenced area specifically designated for the exclusive use of dogs and their owners. This policy allows for a wide range of recreational activities to simultaneously occur in a County Parks.

There are a large number of dogs in Santa Cruz County and interest in offering additional opportunities for pet owners to exercise and recreate with their dogs. Consideration should be given to the number of fenced off-leash dog facilities needed to serve the community, geographic distribution of facilities, and criteria for fenced off-leash dog areas. With this in mind staff has developed the following criteria for locating fenced off-leash dog areas.

Level of Service. Level of service refers to the quantity of off-leash facilities serving the population. Review of publications, studies and master plans prepared by other communities suggests that:

- a high level of service would average about 1 facility per 30,000 residents,
- a moderate level of service averages about 1 facility per 136,000 residents, and
- a low level of service would average about 1 facility per 728,000 residents.

A number of communities have set a goal of providing 1 facility per 30,000 to 50,000 residents. The total population of Santa Cruz County is 262,382. The population in the unincorporated areas of the county served by Santa Cruz County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services is almost 130,000. This population is currently served by fenced off-leash dog areas at the following County Parks:

- Chanticleer Park, approximately 20,000 sq ft
- Polo Grounds Park, approximately 1 acre
- Pinto Lake Park, approximately 16,000 sq ft.

In addition, County residents have access to off-leash dog areas provided by the cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Watsonville with a new fenced off-leash dog area planned by the City of Capitola.

Based upon the levels of service described above, overall Santa Cruz County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services provides a moderately-high level of service of 1 facility per 43,000 residents in the unincorporated area. However, Level of Service alone does not address all of the factors which can influence access to and the use of fenced off-leash dog areas.

Geographic Distribution.

While some dog owners will drive to visit their favorite dog park, the community is better served with a reasonable geographic distribution of fenced off-leash dog areas. While not inclusive of all unincorporated areas of the County, the most populated areas of the county are San Lorenzo Valley, mid-county including Live Oak, Soquel, and Aptos areas, and south-county including Freedom and unincorporated areas around Watsonville.

- The San Lorenzo Valley, with a population of roughly 23,000, is not served by a fenced off-leash dog area. However the City of Scotts Valley has a large fenced off-leash area at Sky Park.
- Mid-county, with roughly half of the population of the unincorporated county, is served by Chanticleer Park in Live Oak and Polo Grounds Park in Aptos, equivalent to a high level of service.
- Unincorporated south-county, with a population of roughly 18,700, is served by Pinto Lake Park, equivalent to a high level of service.

Criteria for Fenced Off-Leash Areas

A variety of factors can contribute to the use and popularity of fenced off-leash dog areas including: location, size, surfacing, parking and other amenities. For a variety of reasons some dog owners prefer not to use off-leash facilities. More common complaints include aggressive dog behavior, owners not controlling their dogs, and dissatisfaction with materials used in dog parks. The following criteria are recommended for consideration when locating a fenced off-leash dog area in a County park.

- **Size.** Aggressive behavior tends to be lower with larger sized dog areas and when both a small dog and large dog areas are provided. Many communities recommend a minimum of 1 acre for a fenced off-leash dog area, although standards may be as low as 5,000 to 10,000 square feet in some communities. Larger areas tend to draw users from a larger geographic area. The interim dog area at Chanticleer Park is well used and is approximately 20,000 square feet. One acre size is not practical given the range of recreational needs and interests in Santa Cruz County and the available park sites. For example, there is a higher demand for athletic fields than the County is able to accommodate. While 1 acre minimum is ideal, given limited land availability and other recreational needs a minimum of 20,000 square feet is recommended. If possible, a separate area for small dogs is preferred.
- **Noise.** Fenced off-leash dog areas can generate noise. Noise studies recently prepared for park master plans suggest that dog areas should be located a minimum of 40 feet from residences and other uses where noise would cause a conflict.
- **Established Recreational Uses and Park Master Plans.** Most County parks are already heavily used. Fenced dog areas should not be placed in an area which negatively impacts or displace existing park uses and should be compatible with those park uses. For example, consideration should be given to potential conflicts such as playgrounds, athletic fields, courts, sensitive habitat and wildlife areas, upslope of community gardens, jogging paths and historic sites.

Master plans have been prepared for most county owned park sites. While these plans may not have been fully implemented, the plans have been prepared with community input and approved by the Board of Supervisors. Additions or revisions to approved park master plans require community input and approval by the Board of Supervisors.

- **Environmental Impact.** While dog owners are required to pick up after their pets, consideration should be given to drainage patterns and sensitive habitat areas such as creeks, wetlands and areas with sensitive species and wildlife. Potential impacts from runoff can be mitigated with landscaping and other erosion control measures.
- **Parking and ADA Accessibility.** Sites with adequate nearby parking and with ADA accessible parking and pedestrian routes are preferred.
- **Facility Design and Amenities.**
 - Fencing should be a minimum of 48 inches high, chain link or woven wire mesh with a double gated sally port
 - Surfacing should be water conserving, easy to clean and easy on dogs paws. Suitable surfacing includes decomposed granite, sand, bark mulch, and dirt.
 - Water should be available
 - Shade should be provided
 - Waste bag stations, trash receptacles, and benches should be provided
 - Rules and regulation signs required
 - Restrooms and a message board are preferred

Shared Use Areas

Shared use areas where an area of a park or beach is designated for off-leash use but is not physically separate from other uses can result in a single-use facility rather than shared use. This is because off-leash dog use can and does displace other uses when people chose not to use a park or beach because of off-leash dog behavior and because of the number of off-leash dogs using an area. This may be especially the case if the shared use area is small or because an adequate number of shared use areas have not been identified. The result may be that a park area intended to be shared by a variety of park users becomes exclusively used by dogs and their owners and that off-leash dog use spills over into other areas of the park.

As evidenced by the previous public comment regarding the LOOLA proposal for shared use at Corcoran Beach, there is not community consensus with regards to shared use areas on County beaches and one would expect similar response to shared use at County parks. Previous reports evaluating the LOOLA proposal outlined numerous issues, costs and potential impacts of establishing shared use areas on County beaches. With the exception of the LOOLA proposal County Parks is not in receipt of other requests for off-leash shared use areas. In addition there are many needs throughout the County park system and resources remain constrained. Changes to the existing County ordinances regarding the requirement for dogs to be on-leash, unless in a fence off-leash area, are not recommended.

Review of County Inventory of Parks and Beach Property

The criteria for fenced off-leash dog areas discussed above address a variety of requirements applicable to the planning and design of dog areas. The criteria are reasonable and common to many communities. However, review of the county park inventory (attached) does not

reveal any candidate sites that meet all of these criteria. This is because most parks have master plans and are already developed and heavily used, or because the site is currently unimproved and has no infrastructure to support park uses. As such, based on the existing county park inventory, consideration of new fenced off-leash dog areas would require repurposing developed parks and open space areas.

- San Lorenzo Valley sites. The San Lorenzo Valley is not served by a County fenced off-leash dog area. Review of the park inventory has not identified an area in an existing park which meets all of the criteria.
- Mid-County Sites. The mid-county area is currently served by two fenced off-leash dog areas, one at Chanticleer Avenue Park and one at Polo Grounds Park. Mid-county achieves a moderately-high level of service. Review of the park inventory has not identified an area in an existing park which meets all of the criteria.
- South-County Sites. The south-county area is currently served by a fenced off-leash dog area at Pinto Lake Park. South-county achieves a high level of service with this site. Review of the park inventory has not identified another area in an existing park which meets all of the criteria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Dogs provide enjoyment and companionship for many individuals and families in Santa Cruz County. Outdoor exercise is good for the well-being of dogs as well as owners. Dogs are allowed on-leash in parks and beach locations throughout the County, and are allowed to play and run off-leash at various dog parks. In recent years, dog owners have approached the Department of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services (POSCS) expressing the desire and need for additional places to play with, exercise and socialize their dogs. Previous reports evaluated the proposal specific to Corcoran Beach. For variety of reasons explained in this and previous reports, staff does not support changing county ordinances to permit dogs off-leash. Using the criteria outlined in this report, a review of the existing county park inventory failed to identify opportunities for additional fenced off-leash dog areas. Staff has concluded that establishment of new areas would require repurposing existing park uses or open space as fenced off-leash dog areas. There remain many needs throughout the County park system and staff are fully engaged implementing planned projects and grants and addressing deferred maintenance needs while resources remain constrained. With the exception of the LOOLA request, County Parks has not received any new requests for off-leash dog areas. As such County parks staff does not recommend further consideration of unfenced shared use areas where dogs would be permitted off-leash. POSCS is committed to addressing all of the recreational needs of the community. Opportunities for fenced off-leash dog areas will be discussed with the community as master plans for new park development or repurposing existing parks are considered in the future.

It is therefore recommended that your Commission take the following actions:

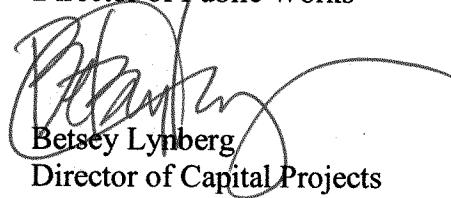
1. Consider public comment.
2. Accept and file this report.

3. Request that staff forward copies of the Parks and Recreation Commission reports to the members of the Board of Supervisors.

Yours truly,

JOHN J. PRESLEIGH
Director of Public Works

By:


Betsy Lynberg
Director of Capital Projects

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Attachment 1 - Commission Reports of October 21, 2013 and June 10, 2013
Attachment 2 - Park and Beach Inventory
Attachment 3 - List of Sources