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Parks and Dogs in Moraga: Staff Recommends Community Outreach

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Photo Andy Scheck

In an effort to clarify the hours during which Rancho Laguna Park is open to the frolicking of off-leash dogs, Moraga Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram proposed amending the municipal code regarding animals and unleashed a maelstrom.

On July 22, the Moraga Town Council is scheduled to review the text proposed by the Parks and Recreation Commission to amend the code and consider Town staff's recommendation to table the issue indefinitely. Please check our website for updates, <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/>.

Staff suggests that a large community outreach effort be conducted by the Parks and Recreation Commission to study the programming of Rancho Laguna Park.

The Parks and Recreation Commission considered the issue thoroughly and received much public comment.

We had to address some poorly stated language that was in the old ordinance and correct the signage at the park,

said Ravi Mallela, chair of the Commission, some dog owners had been fined by Contra Costa County Animal Services because of these inconsistencies.

The Commission also had to define the locations for the off-leash areas at Rancho Laguna Park, Moraga Commons and the Mulholland Open Space Preserve. It was the unanimous recommendation of the Commission that there should be a way for all types of users to be comfortable in the parks, said Mallela, regarding restrictions the new text would impose.

Dog owners were all in support of clarifying the times of the day that dogs were authorized off-leash. They wanted to have a clear town ordinance that would supersede the County's rule that does not authorize off-leash dogs in parks. The contention appeared in restricting dogs to certain areas.

The Parks and Recreation Commission's proposal to limit our dogs to just the paved path and turf area (at Rancho Laguna Park) created a variety of unpleasant emotions, wrote Bill Carman. Lazlo Bonnyay added, when my dog is off-leash and as I have seen with dogs all my life, if they have to (eliminate) they will run to a place where they are comfortable doing it, which may or may not be on the turf or the walking path and there is no way you can stop them, as every owner knows. Most dogs in Rancho Laguna prefer to run to the side in the mulched area, away from the play or picnic grounds. Under the proposed ordinance, all dog owners would be in violation at one time or other.

But for Ingram, leaving the dogs free to roam the picnic and kids play areas is problematic. Rancho Laguna is the only park in the county that allows off-leash dogs in a non-fenced area, said the Director.

Moraga resident Longina Treat agreed, The town is very fortunate that there hasn't been a tragic accident with the dogs and children, she said. She proposed that the town consider an enclosed off-leash area. Sanitation is an utmost consideration, regardless what individuals say, there are many people who simply do not pick up after their animals, she added, an alternative would be to enclose an area with play structures, benches, water fountain, etc, for the children to play.

Bob Reynolds shared her opinion, Some of my earliest and fondest memories are of our family pets and I have had a dog in my house virtually all of my life, said Reynolds, But, I also know of the tragedy that can result from mixing children with dogs. We need to prevent the preventable. We must keep our children safe. Reynolds added that he was concerned that beautiful Rancho Laguna Park was under-used because it has become known as the dog park, avoided by people that are afraid of the dogs, uncomfortable around dogs, or just don't like the presents

that dogs leave behind. We need to do all we can to make Rancho Laguna attractive to everybody, he concluded. For Mallela the mission of the Commission is to make sure that all the users are taken into account in the policy that s defined. It is part of our charter, we need to meet the need of the dogs owners, simply because they represent a very important part of the Moraga population, he said, and we need to take into consideration the needs of all the other groups in town also.

This desire to provide a long-term solution, that supports all park users, prompted Ingram to recommend tabling the ordinance. This text clears up some of the problems, but we need to define a master plan for Rancho Laguna, said Ingram, that plan could alter the dog ordinance altogether. For example, we could propose to move some playgrounds. Ingram says that the proper way to do this is to let the Parks and Recreation Commission look at the long range use for the park, including every user, dog owner, sports group, girl and boy scouts, parents and programs that use Rancho Laguna. He believes that this master plan will de facto resolve the dog ordinance issue.

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