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42 Days for a Show of Faith

By *Sophie Braccini*

Who could resist women's tears and the innocent pleas of little children to save off-leash dog hours in Moraga, even from the distant pedestal where the Town Council presides over the destiny of the town? On March 29 the Council partially laid down arms and gave supporters of off-leash dogs at Rancho Laguna Park 42 days to work out a plan for a fenced dog area that would satisfy the varied needs of all park users, before enacting a resolution that would terminate the possibility of unfettered canine play at the park. The second reading of the resolution the Council was set to adopt that night was postponed until May 9.

If a fenced dog area is proposed at Rancho Laguna Park, where off-leash hours have existed for many years, dog owners need the buy-in of the park's other user-groups, such as sports users, families with young children, and any other type of potential park user. The Council did not identify who these groups might be, or which individuals might be able to represent general park users.

The Council's decision came after a few hours of public comment, mostly from dog owners.

"You got what you wanted," said resident Bill Carman, "It has been an emotional issue... let's stop the retaliation and let's do this (a fenced dog park). We are close to a solution." Carman asked the Council for six months to work out a plan that would include everyone.

"I hear that there is a strong desire to find a solution that works for everyone," said Town Manager Jill Keimach, who continued, "I'd like to propose tabling the decision to a date certain, May 9. That gives 42 days, or three council meetings. We will hear from the community as soon as possible and will have time to do an environmental analysis. And if the community can't come up with a plan, we will have the second reading of the ordinance (ending off-leash hours)."

That idea was approved on a 3-2 vote, because Mayor Mike Metcalf and Council Member Dave Trotter thought that 42 days was not enough time- they had asked for a 90-day grace period.

The Council also indicated that it hoped the residents who previously brought and dropped a lawsuit against the Town would get in touch with the Town's Attorney and agree not to litigate again. Otherwise, the Council did not see the benefit of working on a plan that could be legally challenged.

The Council designated Keimach as the point of contact for the community to work out a compromise. In the days that followed the meeting, community members began contacting her. "There have been a number of people who have already expressed interest in being on a community-based committee to design an off-leash fenced dog park at Rancho Laguna Park," said Keimach on April 2. "Although the Council identified me as a 'point person,' I was not given the authority to select individuals or lead the committee, nor do I think it would be a good approach. I believe it is important that the Town not drive or create the committee or the plan."

The Town offered to provide meeting space at the Hacienda and has requested a proposal for a consultant to conduct a biological assessment and an arborist report.

"Tina Brier and Jeanne Moreau seem to be taking the lead in getting a committee together," said Keimach. Blair Newel, a board member of Lamorinda Dogs, confirmed: "Jeanne Moreau of Lamorinda Dogs is working with the town manager, Jill Keimach, to form a community task force," he said. "The first meeting is scheduled for April 12, after spring break. This group will include active town members from different groups who will work together to fine tune a compromise plan to present at the May 9 Town Council meeting. The timeline is to get a plan approved and begin construction by summer along with the new playground."

Keimach indicated that a conceptual plan should be submitted by April 20, to allow time for staff to prepare a report and publish the packet in time for the May 9 Council meeting. Other individuals interested in participating in the discussions should contact Keimach at jkeimach@moraga.ca.us.

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