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Dogs Will Play...For Now

By Sophie Braccini



Dog supporters came with signs and T-shirts to advocate their cause Photo Sophie Braccini

place on earth," stated Nancy Bluford, also an Orinda resident,

Some warned of the potential dangers associated with dogs roaming freely where kids play. "I know from experience the tragedy that can come from dogs out of control," said Moraga resident and dog owner Bob Reynolds.

Dog advocates responded swiftly. "I am a physician and have seen dog bite injuries," said Moraga's Tyler Smith, "but this mostly happens in homes, caused by family pets that are not exercised enough; incidents in dog parks are unlikely." The Moraga-born father of two young children added that if the safety concern was overwhelming, a solution could be to fence the playgrounds at Rancho Laguna.

Other residents expressed concerns at having the park "confiscated" by dog owners. Moraga resident Virginia Faulkner had hip replacement surgery; she would like to use the paved area around the park for rehabilitative walking. "When I came to the park after work hours I decided not to get out of my car," she said, "I was afraid of the off leash dogs and how they could compromise my balance." Dog owner Mike Weinberger argued, "The park is deserted when the dog people are not there...when it rains only the dog owners and their friends are there." The Council wanted to strike a balance to address the needs of all its citizens. For the Council, the risk of litigation involving the Town if an accident happens is unacceptable. "You have to plan for an unfortunate event even if the probability is very remote," said Council Member Howard Harpham, "because if it happens it is a catastrophe, and the town, and the dog owner, will lose everything."

Because there is no physical barrier at this time, the Council's short term solution was to clearly define the hours for off-leash activities. From April 1 to September 30, dogs are permitted without leash from park opening to 9:00 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to park closing, and from October 1 to March 31 at the same hours in the morning and in the afternoon from 4:00 p.m. to park closing.

"In most communities there are fenced dog parks," said Council Member Mike Metcalf, and that's where we are heading." Metcalf believes that the funds the town will receive from Measure WW -- for parks and recreation facilities -- could be used for a dog park.

Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram urged the Council to pursue a long-term plan for the park. The Parks and Recreation Commission will conduct community outreach activities to assess the needs of all potential park users and find a fenced solution for the dogs.

On Wednesday, July 22, the Moraga Town Council determined that a dog park in which off-leash canines and other visitors can be physically separate is the long term solution in Moraga. In the interim, while this concept is studied and eventually implemented, the Council adopted a modified ordinance that clarifies the hours for off-leash activities at Rancho Laguna Park, but does not limit dogs' access to any area except the parking lot.

The auditorium at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School was filled with dog supporters on the night of the meeting. Some were wearing custom bright blue t-shirts reading "Rancho Laguna Dogs." Most favored leaving Rancho Laguna as is, a place where dogs can roam off-leash at certain times of the day.

Lamorinda residents who have been enjoying the park for years lined up to convey the importance of the park in their lives and that of their canine companions. "This is the only place I can go with my dog," said Kay Biondo, a senior Orinda resident who added that she shops in Moraga now that she brings her dog to the park. "This is the happiest

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