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Published May 12th, 2010

Analysis: Why Isn't the Off-Leash Dog Issue Over?

By *Sophie Braccini*

At the April 28th meeting of the Moraga Town Council, members decided to table the question of where and when dogs could be permitted to roam off-leash at Rancho Laguna Park. A plan under discussion that night, that proposed to allow dogs in an area of the Moraga Commons Park known as the "Back 40" in the afternoon, died right there. However, the issue is still not completely resolved, and staff will be looking into putting the dog question on the November ballot.

The consensus seems to be that there is no alternative to Rancho Laguna for off-leash hours, so why continue to beat the "dead dog?" This canine vortex did not exist until someone got a ticket for letting a dog roam off leash, and the Town decided to clarify its policy. But if the momentum can't be stopped now, it may be because some real issues have surfaced along the way.

It is a reality in Moraga that residents have to share a limited amount of parks and fields amongst competing needs. During the April 28th meeting, Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram said the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) recommends eight acres of community park per 1000 residents; the ratio in Moraga is only 2.89 acres. Ingram added that he feels pressure from recreational sports leagues for more practice fields and he would like to use the field at Rancho Laguna Park for that purpose. That field is the only one that belongs to the Town; all the others belong to the school district.

But then, Rancho Laguna is the only facility in all of Lamorinda where off-leash dogs are allowed. If there are indeed almost 4000 licensed dogs in Moraga, as one resident said at the meeting (at press time we are waiting for Contra Costa Animal Services to confirm that figure), there could be over 10,000 in Lamorinda. Is one part-time off-leash facility really enough for that many dogs? Pressure from Lafayette and Orinda is not always welcome in Moraga. "I'm personally offended when people from other jurisdictions come here and tell us what we are going to do," said Council Member Mike Metcalf during the debate. When Mayor Ken Chew raised the issue at the last tri-city meeting on February 11th, Orinda Mayor Thomas McCormick countered, "You use our roads; we use your parks."

Another issue that has been articulated more and more clearly by dog owners is that the daily off-leash gathering at Rancho Laguna has become, for residents of all ages, an important part of their social lives. Ingram's offer to give handicapped dog owners an option to stay at Rancho Laguna was seen as segregating these residents who need the help of other dog owners to get in and out of their cars, and who appreciate being included in a multi-generational group. Younger residents explained that the park was their only venue for socializing. Proposing alternatives to Rancho Laguna became not just an issue of relocating dogs, but of disturbing the fabric of these residents' social network.

A fourth problem has arisen from the popularity of the off-leash hours. Some residents have complained that the off-leash activities are becoming so well-liked at Rancho Laguna that it has turned the park into a de facto dog park, scaring other users away; among the correspondence sent to the Town are letters from residents who voice that concern. Only a small number of them have been known to come to public meetings. Are they, as Council Member Karen Mendonca said, "Intimidated by a well organized pro-dog user group?"

Mendonca proposed limiting the off-leash period to the morning hours. Council Member Howard Harpham asked for the reconsideration of a plan to construct a barrier between dogs and the play structure areas. Neither of these suggestions was picked up by the Council. However, when Council Member Mike Metcalf proposed exploring the inclusion of the issue on the November ballot, his idea received a 4/1 majority. Now staff will have to come up with clear language asking Moraga voters whether they want shared-use at Rancho Laguna Park and whether the temporal separation now in place should endure.

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