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LamorindaDogs.org

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Bill Carman, Joan Nopp, Joan Birke, Gaylen Parson and Rob Blits (and dogs). Photo Sophie Braccini

The members of the recently-formed Lamorinda Dogs have come a long way from their first rowdy protests at Town Council meetings regarding the off-leash hours at Rancho Laguna Park. They are now a well-funded, non-profit association that collaborates with staff and elected officials. The main objective of securing off-leash hours at the park has not changed, but the erstwhile protesters have become partners in policy-making.

"There was a shift in both the town's and our perception that we should work together to make Rancho Laguna a real multi-use community park," said Lafayette resident and Lamorinda Dogs Board director Blair Newel. The other directors on the Board are Rob Blits, Bill Carman, and Jeanne Moreau; three more could be appointed.

"One of our first objectives is to foster responsible dog ownership," says Lafayette dog owner Blits. "When people bring dogs that are untrained and create incidents we talk to them and recommend that they get training for their pet," said Carman, a Moraga resident. "If incidents continue to happen, we tell them 'maybe you should consider going somewhere else.'" Blit continues, "We can resolve most of the conflicts. A majority of owners want that." The group is now partnering with staff to draft dog-related rules that will be posted at the park.

Consistent communication with Moraga staff has helped smooth over relations between the Town and the group. "They are being good neighbors and they are very responsive," said Jay Ingram, Moraga Parks and Recreation Director. Rancho Laguna Park is a multi-use park, with set off-leash hours, but it remains the prerogative of the Town to restrict those hours to accommodate other events. "I called them about the JM cross country meet that was going to be held at the park during off-leash hours," remembers Ingram, "and they asked their members not to come to the park that day."

But once housekeeping items have been taken care of, the elephant in the room is the physical separation of off-leash dogs and playground/picnic areas. During the last council meeting where this issue was debated, the Council made it clear that a physical separation needed to be put permanently in place at Rancho Laguna Park. Council member Howard Harpham volunteered to be the liaison with the group in the drafting of a final plan.

"We invited Howard (Harpham) to one of our Saturday picnics at the park," said Blits, "and the discussion was very cordial." The tentative plan is to regroup both playgrounds on the north side of the park, fence them in and add several picnic tables; the south side picnic area would also be fenced. The group is seeking guidance from staff regarding the specifications of a physical barrier, getting estimates from contractors and raising funds from members; to date they have reportedly raised about \$8000.

"I expect that a plan should be ready to be presented to the Council at the beginning of next year," said Ingram.

Another fundamental objective of the Lamorinda Dogs Association is to get the multi-use nature of Rancho Laguna Park included in the Parks and Recreation master plan. "We want to avoid the politics," said Blits, "we want a multi-use field where dog owners are responsible and respected. About 50% of Lamorinda residents have dogs; this park is good for the socialization of the dogs and serves a real need for many residents."

Once the situation in Moraga is stabilized, the group plans to help the city of Lafayette with its plans for a dog park. "We would like to bring our experience and what we are learning in Moraga to Lafayette to help with their plan," concludes Newell.

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