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Division over Dividing Rancho Laguna Park

By Sophie Braccini

A record number of residents attended the Moraga Town Council meeting on October 26 hoping to influence what they thought would be a final decision on the off-leash dog policy at Rancho Laguna Park. But after the clock struck midnight the Council, unable to reach a majority vote to approve the plan proposed by the Parks and Recreation Department, decided to continue the discussion at a meeting set for December 14.

During 30 months of debate some progress has been made and several common elements have emerged: a dedicated dog area, physically separated from other users, will be created within the existing park, the dogs will have access to some turf, and the tot lot will be located on the south side of the park.

Whether some of the existing lawn will be included in the dog park is still undecided, but it is likely that the dog area will be located on the northeast part of the property. On December 14, no public comment will be allowed because the process will start exactly where it stopped, at the Council's final deliberation.

Moraga resident Bill Carman, representing the organization Lamorinda Dogs, presented a map for the park that offered an alternative to the sketch proposed by Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram. Where Ingram proposed a fenced dog area under trees and only on dirt, Carman's vision included a large portion of the grassy area to the east of the park. His map, with a path in the shape of a Mickey Mouse head, rallied much support among dog owners, and he was asked by the Council to prepare a more detailed presentation.

Many park users asked for the park to be left alone. "Rancho Laguna is not a dog park, it is a people park," said Alex Popov, "just leave it alone." Brad and Suellen Winegar, who live across from the park and love it the way it is, proposed to experiment by tweaking the off-leash hours before spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix the park: "Maybe longer off-leash hours in the morning, and alternate nights in the summer evenings," suggested Suellen Winegar.

An unusually large number of people who reported feeling excluded from the park due to the dogs also came to the meeting. "Having the park with free dogs is a hazard," said Virginia Falconer, "I want to use the park and should have the right to do it safely." "All dog parks have something in common, they are fenced," said Tina Chambers. After the public comment, the Council began its discussion. Some animosity was apparent, particularly between Mayor Karen Mendonca and Council Member Dave Trotter. Council Member Chew, supported by Mendonca, wanted to approve Ingram's plan. Trotter wanted to avoid haste and review the different possibilities in detail at a later date, to make sure that dog users who have been enjoying the grassy area for decades would not be unfairly deprived of what many consider to be an important part of their lives.

A vote to continue the debate on December 14 was finally snatched by Trotter with the support of Vice Mayor Mike Metcalf and Council Member Howard Harpham, despite the opposition of Mendonca and Chew.

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