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Council Throws in the Towel over Rancho Laguna Dilemma

Second reading of the resolution tonight will end 30 years of off-leash hours

By Sophie Braccini

Much could be said about the dramatic March 14 Town Council meeting at which a resolution that will ban off-leash hours at Rancho Laguna Park in a month passed on a three to two vote of the Council. Mayor Mike Metcalf and Council Member Dave Trotter cast the dissenting votes. The resolution that will be formally adopted tonight, March 28, leaves the responsibility of finding a compromise to the user groups, who must now return to the negotiating table to find a solution that works for everyone.

On March 28, the Council will hear the second reading of the ordinance that ends 30 years of off-leash hours at Rancho Laguna Park. A month later, the ordinance will be enforceable.

The dog owners felt that time separation between users was enough-the Council insisted on a physical separation-and when the Town was sued over its December 2011 ordinance that would have created a fenced dog area in what is now a wooded area at the edge of the park, the Council threw in the towel.

Although the ordinance terminates the off-leash hours at Rancho Laguna Park, it does not end off-leash freedom at Mulholland Ridge. It also specifies that off-leash dogs will be permitted in an up to 3-acre fenced dog-park, the location of which is left undefined -it could either be located in Rancho Laguna Park or at another Town facility. The staff report indicated that the intent of this solution was to encourage all user groups to work together on a plan.

A ray of hope filtered through the gloom of the evening by way of a plan for the park presented by Lamorinda Dogs Association Board Member Jeanne Moreau. It was, in fact, the "Plan B" that was presented by the group in December but dismissed by the Council at the time on a 3 to 2 vote.

The Council could not discuss the plan since it was not on the agenda, but December's third nay vote, Vice Mayor Howard Harpham, indicated this time that "he could live with that plan." The plan, which cuts the park in half leaving some grass for the dogs and some for recreational use, emerged from the March 14 meeting as the best bet to get a global solution.

Town Manager Jill Keimach confirmed though after the meeting that the Town was done working on this issue. "We expect that Lamorinda Dogs will reach out to other user groups and park stakeholders to work something out," she said.

The Town, as the owner of the park, is a stakeholder and during the Council meeting, first discussions among Council members took place to decide who would facilitate talks. "We might add some options for that to happen," said Keimach.

Dog owners across Lamorinda were very disappointed with the Council's decision.

"It is truly dumbfounding when a mere three city officials can change over thirty years of Moraga tradition, over the very passionate protests of hundreds of community members," said Orinda resident Diana Stephens.

"The Town of Moraga Council's recent actions to break with long standing policies and traditions have been very disturbing," said Rob Blits of Lafayette.

"I just hope that we can build something better than the minimum for everyone given the limited resources we have," said Moraga's Bill Carman, a member of Lamorinda Dogs, "The increasing actions of retaliation from dog owners and the local government is not productive for anyone."

The Board of Directors of Lamorinda Dogs responded in a written statement to our request for comment: "While off-leash hours have worked safely for the last 30 years, the Town Council is now requiring a fenced separation of dog activity from other park users. Lamorinda Dogs has long supported the separation of use by early and evening hours, however we have also designed a number of plans with fenced separation that would give Moraga an off-leash area with adequate space for safe activity of running dogs, ball throwing and Frisbee play," wrote the Board on March 23rd. The Board also indicated that the litigation was started by residents not associated with their group and that it has been independently reaching out to different user groups to find common ground to design a solution.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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