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## Public Forum off-leash dogs at Rancho Laguna Park

Editor:

The issue of off-leash dogs at Rancho Laguna Park has been brewing for many years, consuming town staff time and dividing the community. At its March 14th meeting the Town Council voted 3-2 to discontinue off-leash hours at Rancho Laguna except in a Council designated fenced area at Rancho Laguna or some other town park. Two weeks later, at its March 28th meeting, the Council agreed to postpone the ban for 42 days to give the community time to propose a compromise plan that would consider all user groups and be acceptable to a broad spectrum of the community. During this discussion, Council members indicated they would seriously consider a plan developed by Lamorinda Dogs known as "Option C."

A Committee was formed of 15 people who either volunteered or were recommended by the Town Manager. The members represented a cross-section of Moraga park users: dog owners, non-dog owners, youth sports, scouting, park neighbors, equestrians, walkers, the disabled, parents, children and seniors. The undersigned all served on the Committee.

The Committee met three times. We discussed all possible areas on Town property for a fenced dog park and evaluated them in terms of cost, size, usage conflict, parking, availability of water, safety issues, ADA accessibility and time needed to develop. We concluded that the only viable options were Rancho Laguna and the Back 40 at the Moraga Commons. Although two members favored the Back 40 area, most concluded that it was not suitable for many reasons, chiefly cost, time to develop, lack of water on site, disturbance to neighbors and lack of parking.

Our discussion then focused on an actual plan for a fenced dog area in Rancho Laguna. We discussed all potential users including picnickers, scouts, soccer and other sports, walkers and people with dogs. Most members agreed that Option C would provide an appealing off-leash dog area, more than adequately accommodate all other current users of Rancho Laguna and encourage use by people who may have been discouraged from using the park in the past because of dogs.

Thirteen of the 15 Committee members agreed to propose Option C to the Town Council. Two members could not support the proposal and filed dissenting reports. One of those members, Jon Chambers, whose wife serves on the East Bay Eclipse Soccer Club Board, submitted a dissent to the Town Council which included two of his own plans, each providing for a very small off-leash area and lawn space for a dedicated full-size soccer field which is drawn as part of the plan.

When we reviewed the Council agenda packet before the May 9th meeting, we were very surprised to see that the Committee proposal was only one of four plans (two proposed by Mr. Chambers) to be considered by the Council. The other three plans significantly reduced the size of the dog area in order to accommodate a full-size soccer field. None of these plans was ever brought to the Committee for review or consideration. We were also surprised to see letters submitted to the Council in the three days prior to the meeting from East Bay Eclipse Soccer Club, EuroSoccer Camps, Lamorinda Soccer Club, MOL Football League, and LMYA, all endorsing a design at Rancho Laguna that allows for a full sized sports field. Committee members and many other members of the public spoke in support of Plan C at the meeting, but the Town Council chose to all but ignore the Committee's proposal; the only proposals given serious consideration were the two submitted by Mr. Chambers.

We participated on this Committee in good faith. Most of us prefer to keep Rancho Laguna as it is with a few daily hours for off leash activities and the entire park being available the majority of the day for all other users. But we supported Option C because the Council directed the Committee to come up with a compromise that was acceptable to the off-leash community and would accommodate other users. When we were asked to balance the interests of all potential users of Rancho Laguna, we had no idea that we were supposed to be considering for-profit soccer clubs that wish to turn Rancho Laguna into a full-time soccer field. We cannot help but feel that some members of the Town Council had an agenda that was not disclosed to us and never intended to consider any proposal without room for a soccer field.

The Council had stated unequivocally on March 28th that they wanted this issue to be resolved and

directed the Committee to be formed with that goal, every one of the Council members stating in some fashion that they would support Option C if it would mean the end of this dispute. Curiously, on May 9th they were no longer interested. We came so close to being a united community again. We could have all worked together in June to install the new play equipment, create a usable and inviting off-leash area and make Rancho Laguna a true community park. Instead Rancho Laguna will become a dedicated soccer field, many long-time off-leash users will be completely deprived of their only opportunity to exercise and socialize while with their dogs and the divisiveness will continue, making it difficult for the Council to most effectively address other important matters.

Cherie Grant, Committee Chair, Moraga

Dick Ayers, Committee Co-Chair, Moraga

Trish Bare, Committee Member, Moraga

Tina Brier, Committee Member, Moraga

Ed McCauley, Committee Member, Moraga

Jeanne Moreau, Committee Member, Moraga

Blair Newel, Committee Member, Lafayette

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[back](#)

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