

Panama City Beach going to the dogs

'Pet-friendly' waterfront area to be created near Dan Russell Pier

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PANAMA CITY BEACH

After banning dogs from the beach for nearly three decades, the City Council Thursday agreed to create a "pet-friendly" section of the waterfront near the Dan Russell Pier.

At the request of the organization Bay Families With Dogs, council members voted 3-0, with two members absent, to draft a resolution that will temporarily create a specially marked area of the beach just west of the pier where owners can bring their dogs. The organization, formed after dogs were banned from Shell Island last year, asked the city to explore creating a dedicated beach area where pets are allowed.

"Forty percent of the U.S. population owns dogs," said Stephanie Somerset, director of the dog-owners group. "We're the same percentage here, and we have zero percent of the beach."

The ban on dogs was included in the 29-year-old ordinance that also restricts motor vehicles and the possession of glass containers on the beach, said City Manager Richard Jackson.

Somerset added that the group had received "an outpouring of sentiment" from Beach residents to see if a 1978 city ordinance banning pets from the beach might be amended.

Councilman Jeff Ferguson asked fellow council members and the city staff to explore a viable option that would satisfy both pet owners and non-owners.

In a lively and sometime humorous discussion that drew in the city police, Public Works Department employees and city attorneys, the council decided to try a pilot program for six months in which the western side of the city-owned beachfront at the pier will be marked and identified as open for dogs and their owners. The section will be open from sunrise to sunset each day, and dogs will be required to remain on a leash while on the sand or in the water.

City Attorney Doug Sale suggested the program should be modeled along the same lines as dog rules now in effect at Frank Brown Park and Aaron Bessant Park, with dog waste stations installed as an aid to visitors.

Mayor Gayle Oberst directed city staff to prepare a resolution creating the trial program for consideration at its next meeting on Oct. 11. An initial concept to open the beach's entire public domain from the erosion control line to the water was dismissed as unworkable.

Noise ordinances

In other business Thursday, council members received an update on how other Florida resort localities are employing noise ordinances to balance the needs of entertainment businesses and residents. Assistant City Attorney Amy Ross said she found 10 different noise ordinances in effect that set decibel standards for controlling noise and employ decibel meter readings to determine whether an activity is too loud.

The council agreed to give the city manager and legal staff two months to identify a technical consultant who can help draft a proposed ordinance.

Dog-fly control program

The council also agreed to draft a resolution encouraging the state government not to cancel the dog-fly control program in its current round of budget cuts. Ed Hunter, director of the Beach Mosquito Control District, warned that the existing DC-3 aircraft used for spraying Dibrom to control the flies is 61 years old and is beginning to suffer from maintenance difficulties. The state has declined to fund a new aircraft in the past four years.

