

To: Parks and Recreation Commission
From: Nicholas J. Calderon, Parks Director
Subject: San Mateo County Parks Department's Off-Leash Dog Recreation Pilot Program's Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration

RECOMMENDATION:

Make a Recommendation to the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors to Certify the Parks Department's Off-Leash Dog Recreation Pilot Program's Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration.

BACKGROUND:

At the October 23, 2019 Board of Supervisors meeting, the Board amended the County Ordinance Code to authorize specified forms of on-leash dog recreation in San Mateo County parks. Prior to this action, all forms of dog recreation were prohibited in County parks. Today, on-leash dog recreation is allowed at the Coyote Point Recreation Area, Devil's Slide Trail, Pillar Point Bluff, Quarry Park, Mirada Surf, Junipero Serra Park, and the Coastal Trail at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve.

At the same meeting, the Board directed the Parks Department ("Department") to: (1) develop a recommendation for expanded on-leash dog access opportunities in County parks, and (2) develop a recommendation for an off-leash dog recreation pilot program. To assist in this process, the Department created the San Mateo County Parks Dog Work Group ("Work Group") which was comprised of two Parks Commissioners, three park rangers, members of the Midcoast Community Council and Pescadero Municipal Advisory Council, and representatives from the dog owner, conservationist, equestrian, and mountain bike communities. After holding monthly public meetings for one year and receiving public feedback, the Work Group developed a recommendation for off-leash dog recreation pilot locations and management policies. The Work Group's recommendation is included as Attachment 1.

With the Work Group's recommendation as a guide, the Department prepared its recommendation for an off-leash dog recreation pilot program (Attachment 2). While similar in scope to the Work Group's recommendation, the Department's recommendation requires dog owners to have physical control of their dog(s) when approaching persons not engaging in off-leash dog recreation. This policy is included for the safety and comfort of all park visitors.

Both the Department's and Work Group's recommendation were presented to the San Mateo County Parks and Recreation Commission ("Commission") at its February 2020 meeting. The Commission voted to have the Department present both recommendations to the Board for consideration.

Before the recommendations could be presented to the Board, a California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) analysis was required. In accordance with CEQA, the Department prepared an Initial Study (“IS”). The IS determined that due to potential environmental impacts, a Mitigated Negative Declaration (“MND”) needed to be prepared prior to launching a pilot program. The Department worked with its consultant to prepare the IS/MND (Attachment 3), which was released for a 30-day public review/comment period on July 15, 2021.

DISCUSSION:

Both recommendations propose piloting off-leash dog recreation at Pillar Point Bluff and Quarry Park for 12 months, though the trails proposed for off-leash dog recreation differ slightly in each recommendation. Because off-leash dog recreation is currently prohibited by County ordinance, each recommendation also includes a series of management policies that would be used to amend the County Ordinance Code. The amendments have been drafted with consideration to protecting park users and natural resources.

Since the Department does not know which pilot program version the Board will authorize, the IS/MND evaluated the potential environmental impacts created by off-leash dog recreation occurring on all trails in both parks. Each recommendations’ management policies are so closely aligned, for CEQA purposes, the differences are negligible.

Through its analysis, the Department did not identify potentially significant impacts that would result from implementation of either proposed pilot program. While no potentially significant impacts were identified, there are several impacts that will be less than significant with the implementation of mitigation measures. These include, but are not limited to, impacts to historical resources, archaeological resources, and ambient noise levels. The Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (Attachment 4) will ensure all appropriate mitigation measures are properly implemented.

Research is inconclusive in regard to if dog recreation will have a significantly greater impact than human recreation on the flora and fauna found at Pillar Point Bluff and Quarry Park. This creates a need to closely monitor the pilot program and its impacts. To assist in the monitoring of the pilot program, the IS/MND includes an Adaptive Management Plan (“AMP”). The purpose of the AMP is to ensure that any environmental impacts that may be created by off-leash dog recreation at Pillar Point Bluff and/or Quarry Park are minimized to the greatest extent possible, and that visitors with and without dogs are able to enjoy their experience at these San Mateo County parks.

The AMP uses eight (8) indicators and corresponding standards to monitor the pilot program: presence of dog waste, fecal coliform levels, harassment of wildlife, dog entry into sensitive areas, dogs traveling off trail, leash compliance for on-leash trails, interactions between other visitors and dogs, and changes in park visitation in response to visitors with off-leash dogs. These indicators were selected based on values identified by the Work Group and Department. Each indicator's standards will be measured on a per park basis and not cumulative for both parks.

The Department's Natural Resource Management division will oversee routine monitoring at Pillar Point Bluff and Quarry Park to measure ordinance compliance and to document any environmental impacts that may occur. The Department has also contracted with the San Mateo Resource Conservation District to conduct water quality testing to monitor for any impacts to water quality. The Department intends for all monitoring to be conducted by Department staff and RCD staff, however, if volunteers are needed, the Department will coordinate to use neutral, unbiased volunteers to preserve the integrity of the pilot program.

If the standards established in the AMP are not met, the Department may implement new management strategies to gain compliance. No changes to management strategies would be made without having data to support the change and first notifying the public. All changes would be commensurate to the impacts being observed.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Sufficient funding is included in the Department's Fiscal Year 2021-22 Adopted Recommended Budget to monitor the pilot program in accordance with the AMP and contract with the RCD to monitor water quality levels.