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Barking Up The Right Tree: Beverly Hills Dog Park Is Coming

By Victoria Talbot

Following a session that lasted until nearly 1 a.m. with the Council Chamber filled to capacity and spilling over into an overflow room, the Beverly Hills City Council gave staff direction to go forward with an off-leash dog park at the corner of Alden Drive and Foothill Road.

All five council members agreed to move forward, with some details yet to be worked out.

In the next step, it is "staff's goal to return to the City Council at the Nov. 17 meeting with the agreement for design and

construction for a basic dog park, and a list of enhancements to be considered. At the same time, staff's goal is to present the updated Mitigated Negative Declaration for final adoption, which would include changes to accommodate the proposed design and operational plan," according to a statement released Thursday.

Supporters and opponents filled 116 speaker cards, with 61 speakers, as public comment continued to about 11:30 p.m. Passions flared on both sides, with some comments eliciting remarks from the

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DOG PARK

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crowd, others ending in applause from one side or the other.

"Council also gave direction for staff to develop a permitting process that would accommodate 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. hours of operation, staffing considerations and an earlier recommendation from the Recreation and Parks Commission that would allow dog owners who work in the City or are staying at local hotels to use the park in addition to residents," said the statement.

Councilmember Lili Bosse, who made the dog park her top priority last year as mayor, championed the evening.

Looking at the huge stack of comment cards, Mayor Julian Gold asked if speakers could limit their comments to just, "oppose" and "support" to facilitate an earlier ending to the meeting.

Councilmember Bosse objected, pointing out that the public had made a great deal of effort to come to the meeting so their voices could be heard, and they should be permitted to speak. Gold relented, granting 90-seconds to each speaker, instead of the usual three minutes.

Given the late hours, many speakers had left by the time their names were called.

It has taken a decade for the City to find a suitable location for a dog park.

"Sometimes it takes a long time," said Vice Mayor John Mirisch. "In 2010, I asked Recreation and Parks to look into this location. It should have happened a few years ago. It went through a long and extensive process, and I'm sure this will be the best result. I'd actually like to see all of it (the dog park is on part of a 5-acre city-owned parcel) converted into green space."

Councilmember Bosse agreed. However, plans are afoot for a private developer to lease the property and build condominiums, said Bosse.

Opposition came from the four orthodox synagogues located in the area, particularly from Young Israel of North Beverly Hills, led by Rabbi Pini Dunner. Clearly, congregants fear that dogs pose a danger to their families walking to and from the synagogue.

Though other issues were brought up, such as the Americans With Disabilities Act compliance (for which City compliance is mandated), to complaints of dog waste on the sidewalk, the majority of the speakers in opposition feared being bitten or attacked by dogs.

Support came from commissioners past and present, hotel owners, the Beverly Hills

Chamber of Commerce, as well as neighboring Teri Austin, president of the Amanda Foundation, Dr. John Winters of the Beverly Hills Small Animal Hospital, Animal Advocates Tina Sinatra and Bill Crowe of the PetCare Foundation and many members of the community, both with and without dogs.

Located across the street from the project, Austin said, "I am confident that this new dog park will prove to be an excellent opportunity for the community of Beverly Hills to spend time with both their furry pals and their neighbors."

"Sadly, it became an arduous process, but the dogs will have their park and that is all that matters," said Tina Sinatra, whose petition in support of the dog park gathered hundreds of signatures.

Several residents pledged financial support, as well, including Marcia Hobbs, president/publisher of *The Courier*, and residents Jon Bosse and Harvey Englander.

Rabbi Dunner said that he is against the dog park. "I have legitimate concerns, that it would have a detrimental affect on the local synagogues," he said. "With mitigations and compromises we could tolerate it. Despite attempts and promises, this has not been the case."

Through three very long and detailed special public meetings with the Recreation and Parks (R&P) Commission, four meetings with City Council and R&P liaisons, and numerous efforts to meticulously walk through every single point he brought up, Dunner insists that not one thing has been done to satisfy his conditions for mitigation.

Dunner has said that he wanted a children's playground there and that he wanted to close the park on Friday evenings and Saturdays for the Sabbath and on high holy days, so that no dogs will be on the sidewalks when his constituents walk to temple.

Mitigation of the arsenic-tainted soil on the lot would be prohibitively expensive if it were to be used for a children's playground, residential use or habitation, including removal of soil to a much deeper level. Passive use, such as a dog park, requires a lower level of mitigation, digging down to remove the top 12-inches of soil. Clean soil will fill to six inches, and a barrier put in place. Then another six inches of clean soil will backfill.

On top of that would be decomposed granite. Arsenic does not travel within the soil and it does not seep into groundwater, according to the Department of Toxic Substance Control. Once mitigated, it

would remain stabilized.

The R&P Commission did not support closing the park on the weekend, when most people will be off work, and free to use the park.

Councilmember Willie Brien gave his support and conditions, but left before the meeting ended. "I'm not sure that this is the best location for the park but I'm not sure you'll ever find the best location. This is going to happen in this location. I love the idea of dog park," said Brien. He suggested that the City liaise again with the synagogues to again address their concerns. "Maybe we can talk and compromise and we may be able to get closer than we are today and temper some of the displeasure."

Councilmember Nancy Krasne almost departed before the final poll was taken, but remained at Bosse's insistence. "Let's finish this," said Bosse.

Bosse was intent on seeing that the item was not continued over to the next meeting of the City Council and that the ball was moved forward after ten years of trying to get a dog park in Beverly Hills.

The council made concessions to Dunner that included having staff look into a ranger that will be posted on site at least for the first six months, to see if it is necessary.

The council also said that it wanted to keep communications open and frequent between the R&P Commissioners, City staff and the synagogues, to monitor any issues.

Councilmember Bosse said the meeting was a "landmark time in Beverly Hills. I am beaming with pride that our beloved community will finally have our first dog park. Gratitude goes to the amazing Recreation and Parks Commission who worked tirelessly with input from our passionate community to make this a reality.

"The mitigations put in place and the continuous open dialogue with the neighbors and community will help ensure our first dog park will be a fabulous asset we can be proud of."

