

# UNLEASH THE BEACH: A PROPOSAL FOR SANTA MONICA

## Executive Summary

UNLEASH THE BEACH is a grassroots campaign to establish an off leash dog zone on the Santa Monica Beach. This proposal is being presented to the Santa Monica City Council as a step towards implementing a pilot program for a dog beach. We request the Council to instruct staff to work with us in finding the best ways to implement the program. The proposal has been shared with the Environmental Task Force, Recreation and Parks Commission, and the SM Chamber of Commerce.

Prompted by the lack of a dog area anywhere on the beach in LA County and the growing movement for off leash areas around the world, founder and organizer Georja Umano Jones and several like-minded dog lovers approached close to 2,500 people in the local community with a petition. The petition requests that Santa Monica allow a small portion of its beach to be used by people with their dogs, as they are already allowed at least 58 existing dog beaches in the State of California. An overwhelming majority of those asked have enthusiastically signed on to this idea. (More are adding themselves to the list daily, although active recruitment for more supporters has slowed for now.)

Along with our petitions, we are also submitting a growing list of 52 dog owners who have committed themselves to at least one hour per week during the pilot program to help monitor the beach, making sure people are following the rules and cleaning up after their animals.

Within just a few months, we have had a rally as well as lots of local press (Santa Monica Daily Press, Santa Monica Mirror, Santa Monica Observer, Argonaut, Ocean Park Gazette) and television news coverage (NBC local news) of the movement. Many responsible dog owner/guardians have stepped forward to volunteer in various capacities, including scientists to study the environment and attorneys to investigate legal aspects of the project..

Unleash The Beach's proposal contains research on environmental, health, safety, liability issues concerning dog beaches. Part of this research was done in conjunction with FREEPLAY in Venice and PaliDog in the Palisades, two local groups who are actively seeking dog beaches –one at

Dockweiler Beach in El Segundo, and the other in the Palisades. The report takes a close look at many other dog beaches in the state. There are scientists' statements and water quality studies. There is the consideration of dog owners wanting the recreation space as tax paying citizens. Economic advantages are also presented.

Mike Gordon, State Assemblyman, is actively working with FREEPLAY and L.A. County to work out a dog beach solution at the Dockweiler site. Several candidates for LA City Council and Mayoral office have the dog beach high on their priorities and would help implement the project. Santa Monica has an opportunity to be a leader here. If we get our dog beach started, it will open the door for LA and County authorities to open up other beaches.

We have spoken with the Coastal Commission which has recently permitted Long Beach to open its Dog Zone. As long as nothing is being built on the beach, (as a fence), the commission is not opposed to a dog beach in principle.

We have laid out suggested guidelines and operating procedures as well as possible resources for the beach. There is also available a complete, impartial report, which was conducted on all aspects of the newly established Long Beach Dog Zone. This dog zone recently finished its year probation and has been accepted indefinitely by the Long Beach City Council.

After carefully surveying the beach, we suggest an area of the beach between lifeguard stands 11 and 12, about one tenth of a mile long. The sand is particularly wide there—more than 800 feet. We are asking for the section near the water from the storm drain fence west—about 300 feet depending on the tide. We have asked for this area because it is used less than most of the beach (except for the area north of California, in front of the big houses and the Jonathan Club to the northern end.) It is a long 5 block walk from the pier and about 4 blocks from the entrance at the incline. There is a small parking lot but it is never full at present. If a different area of the beach is deemed more suitable, that would be acceptable to dog owner/guardians as well.

The proposed dog zone is:

- less used than other parts of beach
- parking lot never full at present
- wide sand would make dog zone over 400 feet away from bike path
- there is an asphalt walking road from the pier to the area
- fence already exists around the storm drain which is a natural place for signage and doggie bags
- inconvenient for most people to get to walk to
- \$8 parking fee would discourage out of towners
- nearby Perry's food stand very supportive of dog beach
- no houses between these life guard stands
- restroom nearby and showers, too
- poles already exist behind the lifeguard stand which would also help create natural barriers and places for baggies.
- In the cooler months the surrounding area is very barren of people

Because of the storm drain, we understand that usage after rain would not be safe for 72 hours. We would have strict entry ways of 90 degrees for crossing the bike path, with big signs and possible lights to alert people on the path.

Dog beaches are environmentally sound. All the 58 designated dog beaches in California that we have surveyed show that they basically have the same levels of bacteria as do other beaches. All have excellent water quality that is monitored regularly by the local municipalities, counties and health departments where they are located. The levels of coliform do not exceed the limits considered to be safe, except after rain and near storm drains.

At all the other California dog beaches that have been surveyed, there have been no safety issues. Dog owner/guardians are responsible for their own dog's actions. Municipalities, when they make regulations in good faith in the public interest and enforce the rules, are generally not liable. There have been no claims against municipalities in all 58 dog beaches surveyed.

Dog beaches do not endanger human health. Rand scientist and Santa Monica resident Dr. Sandy Geschwind, Environmental Epidemiologist, studies the adverse health effects associated with environmental pollutants. After reviewing the scientific data, she assesses that "while it is critically important to ensure that the dog beaches are maintained properly and the waste dealt with responsibly, it is NOT a significant source of pollution or health risk and the focus of concern should be directed towards the true

sources of pollution – the storm drains”. And UCLA School of Medicine’s Dr. Ellie J.C. Goldstein, whose specialty is infectious diseases, wrote in April, 2004, “To date, there have been no infectious diseases in general, or individual cases in specific that would limit in anyway or pose a risk to the public safety from a dog beach.”

Besides being beneficial to the dogs, the right to recreate with their dogs helps create a community of neighbors and friends who socialize with each other and their dogs. Rules and regulations regarding cleaning up after dogs are better followed when there is a balanced approach to accommodating dog owners: a fair share of the beach. Unleash The Beach is asking for only 2% of the beach sand and only 6% of the waterfront. The percentage of dog owners in Santa Monica, according to census and the American Veterinary Association, is about 17%.

In all 58 dog beaches surveyed, there have been no liability or safety issues. In fact when dogs commingle on the open beach, they are happy and free and there are many fewer problems than could exist in an enclosed area or an area where they are on leashes and feeling the need to be protective.

Additionally, dog beaches are good business. In Huntington Dog Beach, Martin Senat, Pres. Of the local dog group, writes, “We are able to ascertain that the city derives at least \$100,00.00 a year from parking meters - dog users only. We also know from retail stores and restaurants that when dog beach is busy, their takings climb with visitors. Over the past two years we believe the additional benefits to the city in restaurants and retail stores are in the vicinity of \$250,000.00. That is a total of \$350,000.00 each year including parking meters.” In Carmel, which has a 24 hour dog beach and is known for being the most dog friendly, the attraction has led to 16 dog friendly hotels and several restaurants with dog patios, two dog art galleries and pet boutiques. Big hotels hire pet sitters to take the dogs to the beach.

What about state regulations? Many of the dog beaches we surveyed are state beaches. Those that are strictly operated by the state are generally on leash dog beaches. However, in addition to Santa Monica, there are state beaches run by a city or county that allow for off leash, including Huntington Dog Beach (in which the on leash rule is not enforced by the City), Santa Cruz (whose dog beach has been in existence for a good 20 years), and county-run Point Isabel State Park in Richmond, San Francisco area, (where there are 54 acres of off leash dog beach), and East Shore State

Park (which has 2-3 acres of off leash dog beach). This list does not include the many off leash beaches that are considered to be city or county beaches. However, in every one of these beaches, there are regulations, monitoring, and follow up.

One possible way of funding the dog beach would be to require a special yearly dog beach tag before a person could bring their dog to the beach. In order to get a tag, one would have to prove the dog is licensed with up-to-date shots. A person purchasing a tag would have to sign a liability release to reduce even further any liability to the City. The cost of the dog tag (perhaps from \$10 to \$25) would be put in a special beach fund, which could be used to pay for extra hours of enforcement from Animal Control.

Other suggestions for the establishment of the dog beach:

- only 2 dogs per adult
- no aggressive dogs or must be put on leash
- no female dogs in heat
- all dogs must wear up-to-date license and registration
- dogs must enter off leash area only from a 90 degree angle from the parking lot,
- designated crossing areas of the bike path will be clearly marked and perhaps have lights as well
- dog beach volunteers will help monitor and clean the beach (already more than 50 have signed up plus a pooper scooper service)
- water quality shall be tested at the site every week
- no use after a rain for 72 hours because of the storm drain pollution
- signs with boundaries and rules clearly marked
- brochures with rules and regulations available
- “incident report” forms available for people with suggestions or problems
- start with shorter hours and increase with successful operation: perhaps 7 to 10 a.m. and 4 to 7 p.m.

The small amount of money needed for the beach would pay for signs, and bags. There are a number of ways that the dog beach could be funded, in addition to the annual tags mentioned above: The city would receive extra revenue from the parking lot, which at present is never full. Unleash The Beach has started looking into the process of creating a California nonprofit corporation. As such we could raise money through events and silent auctions. We could also create a line of “dog beach” apparel and have investigated this idea with a designer and a merchant.

Georja Umano Jones, having done most of the research and spearheaded the organization, would like to work with staff and be on any committee which helps to actualize this project. A few other involved community members who are dog owner/guardians would also participate.