

Dog daze

Changes possible after Shell Island meeting

*By Ryan Burr
News Herald Writer 747-5074 / rburr@pcnh.com*

PANAMA CITY

Debate on whether dogs should be allowed on Shell Island has prompted a meeting next week to take residents' input on future uses for the recreational hot spot. The St. Andrews State Park staff, which is employed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, has organized the public comment session that will begin at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the Gulf Coast Community College Sarzin Lecture Hall. "We really want to hear the comments," said park manager Carl Keen. "Public comment has a lot to do with how we manage our park. Those comments can (lead to) changes in the future."

Some changes have occurred. Over Labor Day weekend, local developer Mary Sittman, who owns a beachfront lot on Shell Island, invited members of the newly formed group Bay Families with Dogs to bring their four-legged pets to her beach on Saturday.

Stephanie Somerset, founder and president of the group, said Saturday was a fundraiser, as well as a holiday weekend reprieve for about 20 dogs to enjoy the island. Bay Families with Dogs is trying to obtain nonprofit status to help pay for expenses such as Web site enhancements and educational literature on how to be a responsible pet owner.

"We're getting new members all the time, and we're stressing that they attend the meeting," she said.

Dog obedience training also was offered on Saturday, since the problem that caused DEP to step up enforcement was dogs tampering with or destroying shorebirds' nests.

Since May, the DEP's Bureau of Florida Park Patrol has handed written warnings and cited people who violate the ban on dogs at public beaches, which is county imposed and a law in most Florida state parks. Sittman and other residents think they have found a way to legally bring dogs to Shell Island by exclusively occupying private land, where they believe state and local rules do not apply.

"I did it so we can encourage people to participate in this hearing and to help the private lot owners develop their own management plan for Shell Island," Sittman said.

Sympathetic to dog owners, the County Commission has directed its land-use attorney to research ways for parts of Shell Island and mainland Bay County beaches to allow dogs.

On the Web

Read an archive
of stories about
the Shell Island
controversy at
newsherald.com

Island has prompted a meeting next week to take

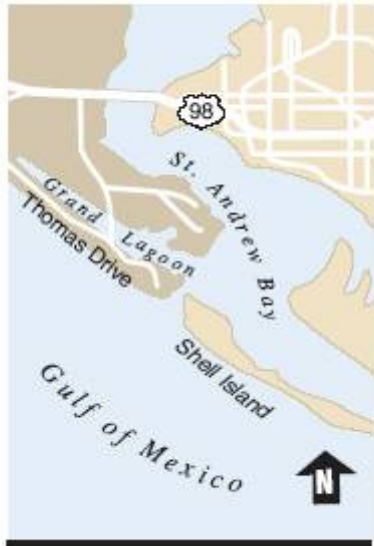
See DOG DAZE 3B





Tom Needham / News Herald File Photo Shell Island has become very popular with tourists who visit in throngs every day. Law enforcement is trying to minimize the impact to the island — not by limiting people, but by banning dogs on the island.

Shell Island



John Russo / The News Herald

