

Crist's veto may lose its bite

DEP review of state park policies would affect dogs on Shell Island

By Ryan Burr

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Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed a bill that would have decriminalized violations of most state park rules, though penalties may be downgraded anyway.

"In wake of the veto, we're reviewing our enforcement policies," said Sarah Williams, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, or DEP. "We'll evaluate (violations) on case-by-case basis. When it's a more serious offense, we may still pursue criminal action."

Officers for the Florida Park Patrol, which is under DEP, began issuing warnings and criminal citations for park violations last summer. In Bay County, dog owners were incensed at being handed criminal citations for bringing their dogs to Shell Island, part of which is owned by St. Andrews State Park.

Williams said the department will look at violations "based on the severity of the situation. In the case of dogs on the beach, we may only look at criminal enforcement for dogs that are a threat to a person's safety."

DEP officials support the decriminalization effort, she said.

The House and Senate this spring unanimously approved bills lessening the punishment for breaking state park rules to a civil offense, which may include a fine.

Crist vetoed the bill because of the legislation's effects on the Babcock Ranch Preserve in South Florida, he said in a letter Tuesday to Florida Secretary of State Kurt Browning.

"While the veto is a disappointment, the governor's explanation is an affirmation for boaters and park visitors statewide," said Stephanie Somerset, executive director of Bay Families with Dogs.

When the bill related to state park rules originally was filed, Somerset said it did not contain language affecting the ranch preserve.

"That's what killed it," she said. "These bills get so many amendments added to them, and they morph into something completely different."

Somerset said she is confident the bill will be reintroduced, maybe later this year if there is a special legislative session. Members of Bay Families with Dogs already have contacted Rep. Fay Culp, R-Tampa, the bill's sponsor, to request that it be brought up again.

On the Web

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