

# Quest for dog-friendly beach continues

By Ryan Burr

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Bay County dog owners are making inroads in their quest for creation of a dog-friendly section of Shell Island.

An organization dedicated to reserving recreational beach and mainland property for dogs to roam free will dock this afternoon at Shell Island for a fundraiser. Additionally, members of Bay Families with Dogs will promote their cause to designate a dog-friendly section of the island and cleaning trash off the beach. The organization held a similar event last year on a private lot owned by developer Mary Sittman, where members will convene today.

Bay Families with Dogs executive director Stephanie Somerset said her organization will use proceeds from the fundraiser to cover advertising costs aimed at attracting new members and for fees associated with attaining nonprofit status. Although donations will be accepted, hot dogs will be served for paying customers.

Last summer, Florida Park Service officers began issuing warnings and criminal citations to people who let their pets run free on Shell Island. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which oversees the Park Service, later said it would not enforce its policies on private property, county property or below the mean high-water line, meaning on the wet sand and in the water.

Although Park Service officers have the authority to issue criminal citations for state park offenses and they plan to continue doing so this summer, the Florida Senate has taken up a bill that would decriminalize nearly all violations of state park rules.

The most serious state park violations, such as killing wildlife, still would be criminal, but the rest of the violations would be considered civil penalties with fines up to \$1,000 and possible eviction from the park.

The Senate Committee on Environmental Preservation and Conservation voted unanimously to approve Senate bill 2054 on March 22. Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, serves on the committee.

Somerset is encouraged by the latest developments, though she said the main objective still must be achieved: to reach an agreement with

the county, DEP and St. Andrews State Park to designate part of Shell Island's mainland a place that dogs can frolic.

"Even though Shell Island is more than 1,200 acres and dog owners are 40 percent of the U.S. population, we're not asking for 40 percent of the island. We just want a spot in the sun," she said. "There is a considerate and controlled way to do this." Bay County officials, Somerset said, have requested three times for the DEP participate in a joint meeting, also including any interested stakeholders, to find a way for dog owners to enjoy the island.

DEP spokeswoman Katie Flanagan said Friday the agency wants the meeting and is looking to schedule it after the legislative session ends in early May.

County Commissioner Jerry Girvin said Friday that such meetings normally don't occur immediately.

"The DEP may think we're doing this for political purposes. They just need to know we're serious," he said.

In July last year, the County Commission agreed that Shell Island was not fulfilling its role as a recreational destination by prohibiting dogs on beaches. And although the county has an ordinance against dogs on public beaches, commissioners have worked to identify beach property both on Shell Island and inland where dogs could be permitted.



Andrew Wardlow / The News Herald

Stephanie Somerset and Dave Crosby talk about a trip to Shell Island on Friday. Somerset is executive director of Bay Families and Dogs, which is holding a fundraiser today to promote their cause of designating a dog-friendly section of Shell Island as well as cleaning up trash on the beach.