

Shell Island rules softening

By Ryan Burr

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Bringing dogs onto Shell Island will no longer be a criminal offense come July if the governor signs legislation decriminalizing most state park rules.

Last summer, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, or DEP, officers began issuing warnings and criminal citations for violations to people who let their pets run free on Shell Island, part of which is St. Andrews State Park property, and had beer on its beaches.

The DEP 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.

The most serious state park violations, such as killing wildlife, still would be criminal actions under the new legislation. The rest of the violations, such as lighting a grill in the wrong area and consuming alcohol, would be considered civil penalties with fines up to \$1,000 and possible eviction from the park.

The changes would take effect on July 7.

"This is a victory because the Legislature has reduced the charges for the tickets," said Stephanie Somerset, executive director of Bay Families with Dogs. "And when lawmakers go into session, very seldom do they reduce government's power."

Before the Legislature voted on the bill, it stated that it would be criminal "to capture, trap, harass or injure wild animals in parks." Somerset said supporters of the legislation convinced lawmakers to remove the word "harass" because it's "an overbroad term that could have been too loosely interpreted. For example, are you harassing a gull if you shoo it away from your food?"

Biologists with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, or FWC, had reported dogs were destroying shore birds' nests on the island, which prompted stepped-up enforcement last summer.

FWC staff observed last year that snowy plover and least tern nests had been destroyed. FWC biologist John Himes said Monday he has not received recent reports about the same problem on the island. Snowy plovers begin to nest in March and least terns in May.

Somerset organized Bay Families with Dogs last year to push for dogfriendly beaches, but the legislation does not assist in that effort. Dog owners still are attempting to reach an agreement with the county,

DEP and St. Andrews State Park to designate a part of Shell Island's mainland for dogs to frolic.

Mary Sittman, a developer who owns private property on Shell Island, has allowed dog owners onto her land. Somerset said that is a temporary haven, though.

"We want to have a section of the state park property because that park was created with taxpayer dollars for recreational purposes," Somerset said.

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