

PRESS RELEASE

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Crist vetoes park decriminalization bill

PANAMA CITY, FLA. – Bay Families With Dogs, Inc. expressed disappointment Wednesday at Gov. Charlie Crist's decision to veto House Bill 981 which would have decriminalized state park violations throughout Florida. In his letter to the Secretary of State explaining his veto, Crist wrote, "while I support the provisions related to state parks, I have concerns related to the provisions related to the Babcock Ranch Preserve," (an unrelated part of the bill). Governor Crist's Deputy Chief of Staff and Legislative Liaison Towson Fraser on Wednesday confirmed by phone that the Governor indeed favors decriminalizing park rules and would favorably consider any future legislation to that effect.

"While this veto is a disappointment, the Governor's explanation is an affirmation for boaters and park visitors statewide," states Stephanie Somerset, Executive Director of Bay Families with Dogs, Inc. "The House and Senate unanimously passed this bill, so we feel confident that it's not a matter of 'if' but 'when' park violations will be decriminalized," she said.

Until the bill can be revisited, Bay Families with Dogs will be working with Bay County and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to create a solution at Shell Island within existing rules, for families who wish to continue the longstanding historical use of certain areas with their family dogs.

During the summer of 2006, more than a dozen visitors to Shell Island were given notices to appear in court on second-degree misdemeanor charges for various park violations ranging from drinking an alcoholic beverage on the beach to having their family dog in the wrong area.

"It threatened to change so many people's way of life that this grassroots organization sprang to life, and we've been fighting to retain our recreational freedoms ever since," said Somerset. "What citizens can do now is visit our Web site for information about park rules, sign up as a member and donate to the cause," she said, noting that contribution can be made online or sent by mail. "Working to retain our way of life is an expensive, but worthwhile fight," Somerset said.