

Bay of Islands dog-owners voice anger at bylaw changes

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About 60 dogs and owners gathered on Opua Beach in protest at a draft bylaw which would make it one of only two beaches in the Bay of Islands where dogs will be allowed off lead. PHOTO / RUTH LAWTON

Northern Advocate

Changes to a controversial dog control bylaw have sparked further outrage among Bay of Islands dog owners, with a proposal for one dog per household in some areas.

The original draft bylaw, released last November, proposed loosening up some of the rules around taking dogs on to beaches, especially in winter.

A second version released in June, however, beefed up the current restrictions designed to protect wildlife. Russell dog owners in particular were upset it designated only one beach in the Bay of Islands, the Beechy St waterfront in Opua, as an off-leash dog exercise area.

They formed a group called the Bay of Islands WatchDogs and called on the Far North District Council to start consulting again from scratch.

Earlier this week the council released a third version of the proposed bylaw which added a second off-leash beach, Sullivans Beach in Paihia, but WatchDogs member Leonie Exel said it was worse than the previous version in almost every other way.

There was still no off-leash beach in the Russell area and, more alarmingly for dog owners, it proposed creating a one-dog per household zone along much of the east coast from the southern Bay of Islands to Hihi in Doubtless Bay. Urban areas would retain the two-dog limit in the current bylaw.

Group members planned to bring their concerns to a meeting of the Bay of Islands-Whangaroa Community Board in Waipapa on Monday.

"To gazette a huge area of the Far North as a one-dog area in the third revision of the policy, with six days to review it before a community board meeting, is disgraceful," Ms Exel said.

The consultation process so far had been so abysmal that "tinkering at the edges" of the bylaw wouldn't fix it.

Instead the group, which now had 600 members, would urge the community board to put a recommendation to councillors to halt the process and carry out further consultation. If the new bylaw was introduced in October as planned there would be "huge non-compliance", she said.

Dean Myburgh, the council's district services manager, said the draft bylaw had already been consulted on extensively. Many people supported the proposal which aimed to balance the needs of dog-owners with other beach users and wildlife.

"However, the council is aware that a number of dog-owners in Russell, Opuia and Paihia have recently voiced strong views about the proposed bylaw. It is therefore asking the community board to give further consideration to the draft bylaw," Dr Myburgh said.

The proposal removed a number of restrictions from the existing bylaw but also introduced new measures to protect endangered wildlife such as kiwi and little blue penguins.

The council couldn't reopen submissions but had asked the community board to consider whether to amend the draft bylaw.

It is due to be considered by the council's Strategy Committee on August 30 and the full council on September 14.

Councils are required to review their bylaws every 10 years. The current Far North dog control bylaw dates back to 2006.

Those happy with the new version of the bylaw include some conservationists and iwi. Arapeta Hamilton, of Ngati Manu, said hapu members were concerned about large numbers of dogs being taken to Te Haumi Beach near Paihia where they "pooed and peed" all over pipi beds.