

## **Far North dog owners win concessions in new bylaw**

By Peter de Graaf

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Bay of Islands WatchDogs member Leonie Exel, of Russell, remonstrates with new Far North District Council chief executive Shaun Clarke.

PHOTO / PETER DE GRAAF

Bay of Islands dog owners have won some concessions over a controversial new dog control bylaw - but it won't be going back to the drawing board as they demanded.

More than 120 people turned out for a meeting of the Bay of Islands-Whangaroa Community Board in Waipapa yesterday to vent their anger over a "draconian" dog control bylaw drafted by the Far North District Council.

The turnout is thought to be a record, easily eclipsing the 60 who attended a board meeting during the Paihia cat controversy of 2013.

The debate lasted more than three hours with four speakers putting the dog owners' position and two speaking up for wildlife.

The debate was impassioned but for the most part civil. It descended into shouting only when the council staffer who drafted the bylaw, Neil Miller, addressed the meeting, leaving new council chief executive and ex-military man Shaun Clarke to bring the meeting back to order.

Jan Graham, of Waipapa, said the bylaw set aside only seven dog exercise areas, not enough for a district the size of the Far North. She questioned the council's commitment after discovering the exercise area on Wiroa Rd, Kerikeri, was an unmarked paddock behind a crematorium with cattle in it.

She called for a full discussion with conservation groups to come up with a "win-win situation".

Russell's Leonie Exel, of the Bay of Islands WatchDogs, called for a new draft and time to study it. The group had only six days to study the latest 73-page proposal, she said.

The way consultation had been carried out, and a proposal to set a one-dog-per-household limit along part of the east coast, had caused "great anger and upset".

However, Brad Windust, of conservation group Bay Bush Action, backed the bylaw.

He said Waitangi was the world's largest flocking site of the NZ dotterel but the birds never had a chance to rest because they were constantly harassed by dogs. Paihia's Te Haumi and Ti beaches and Russell's Long Beach in particular needed protecting.

"It guts me to see dogs running through flocks of endangered dotterels," he said.

In a debate over access to beaches in Paihia, Kaye Vezey, a former SPCA inspector, mooted a compromise whereby dogs could be allowed on the southern half of Ti Beach - roughly from the public toilets to the Bluff - in the morning and evening when there were few sunbathers or swimmers present, leaving the northern end of the beach for birds.

The meeting also had dashes of humour with Mary Wordworth saying a requirement that dogs be kept below the low-tide mark at Tauranga Bay sandspit was "manifestly unfair" to short-legged dogs.

Mr Miller defended the consultation process, saying 6500 letters were sent to registered dog owners.

Only two people in the hall claimed to have received the letters, which he said could be due to problems with the database or people not keeping their details up to date.

The council was already working on identifying new exercise areas, he added.

Asked by board chairman Terry Greening what "wiggle room" the draft bylaw offered, Mr Miller said the proposal to limit dog numbers to one in some areas could be dropped altogether or raised to two, making it the same as the current limit for urban areas.

Mr Clarke said the council had to find a compromise between the needs of dog owners and wildlife which was in a "desperate decline".

He rejected calls to re-consult from scratch, saying there was a limit to how much the council, and ratepayers, would tolerate spending on consultation.

He said people at the meeting had expressed themselves forcefully but with courtesy.

"We have heard you," he said.

Board members voted to recommend that councillors adopt the new bylaw, subject to feedback from yesterday's meeting.

Board member Rachel Smith moved an amendment that the modified bylaw be considered at the October council meeting, not September as originally planned, to give staff more time to make changes.

Afterwards Ms Exel said she was pleased the bylaw would be amended to make it "less draconian" but believed the council should have started again from scratch.

"They spent 18 months getting into this mess, they can spend four months getting out of it," she said.