

Northern Advocate – 2nd August 2017

Russell dog owners up in arms over beach ban

2 Aug, 2017 8:00am



Russell residents are up in arms over a draft bylaw requiring dogs to be kept on a leash on all but a few Far North beaches. Photo / File Northern Advocate

Russell dog owners are up in arms over a draft bylaw which would ban off-leash dogs from every beach on the peninsula.

The only beach in the Bay of Islands where dogs would be allowed off-leash is a narrow strip of sand along Opua's Beechy St, on the other side of the water.

The proposal spurred dog owners to set up a Facebook group called BOI WatchDogs to fight the bylaw. As of yesterday the group had 420 members and had broadened its aims to take on dog issues across the Far North.

It has secured a commitment from acting Far North Mayor Tania McInnes to put the bylaw on hold and is setting up a formal committee. The group is also working on a new name to reflect its Far North-wide focus.

Member Leonie Exel said the group's immediate aims were to get a formal undertaking from the council to put the draft dog control bylaw and dog policy on hold, and that a new round of "thorough and genuine" consultation took place.

The group believed the previous consultation was flawed and didn't take all views into account.

One line about the Russell Peninsula ideally becoming dog-free had caused particular angst. Although that line was contained in a memo, not the actual bylaw, it was "indicative of an unreasonable attitude" that had swung too far in favour of wildlife.

"We need to co-exist and we need to work out ways to do it. We need a policy that's dog, human and bird friendly," Ms Exel said.

About 40 dog owners meet at Russell's Duke Tavern last weekend to formulate their goals. They plan another get-together at Opuia Beach on Sunday afternoon.

The current bylaw dates back to 2006. It bans dog on beaches between 9am and 6pm in summer and requires dogs to be on a leash at many popular beaches year-round.

The first draft of the new bylaw, released last year, kept the summer restrictions but loosened up the wintertime rules by allowing dogs off-leash from March to November on all beaches except Russell and Tauranga Bay.

When a second version of the draft bylaw was released last month, however, the rules for off-leash dogs had been tightened up dramatically.

The new version proposes limiting off-leash exercise areas to Empire St in Kaitia, an area off SH12 in Kaikohe, Roland's Wood and a field on Wiroa Rd in Kerikeri, Beechy St waterfront in Opuia, and Rangiputa Beach. All other beaches are on-leash areas.

Acting Far North Mayor deputy Mayor Tania McInnes said the original draft was "pulled to have some more work done".

"But there are a few things in there [the new version] we have to review and ensure we've talked well to the community about. We're trying to balance the views of people who love dogs and those who are concerned about wildlife. We have to find a way we can have both," she said.

The council is required to update its dog control bylaw every 10 years.

Tension in Russell between dog owners and conservationists has been high since the council seized a husky named Laska. The council said it had been roaming on nine occasions and had been seen with a weka in its mouth.

Draft bylaw a "win-win"

Not everyone's unhappy with the proposed new dog rules.

Conservationist and dog-owner Brad Windust, of Paihia, said the draft bylaw still allowed people to walk their dogs on a leash on most beaches and set aside areas for off-lead exercise.

"I think it [the draft] is looking really good. We need a win-win. We need to protect wildlife and people need areas to enjoy with their dogs."

Mr Windust created his own Facebook forum, called BOI DogWatch, "to put the other side".

"People don't realise that New Zealand is the seabird capital of the world but 90 per cent of them are threatened. We're really lucky to have little blue penguins and dotterels but dogs are constantly harassing birds along our beaches."