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S.F. dog owners barking mad

They say pets should continue to roam unfettered in parks.

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SAN FRANCISCO - In this town, when the subject is dogs, tempers can flare.

Whether it's Duboce Park in the heart of the city or Crissy Field on the bay shore, the long-running and fiery debate over canines seems unending.

The contretemps intensified last month after two pit bulls mauled to death a San Francisco boy, a Santa Rosa girl was nearly killed by another pit bull, and political leaders started calling for restrictions on certain breeds.

While those incidents have receded a bit from public view, underlying tensions between dog owners and their critics remain: Should canines be allowed to roam unfettered in city and federal parks in San Francisco?

"I can't make this more clear as a dog owner," said Brent Plater, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, which wants more restrictions on dogs in city parks and in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

"If you're flouting leash laws," Plater added, "if you're running your dog off-leash in areas where there are not safeguards in place, you are acting irresponsibly, and you're putting the safety and the life of your own dog at risk."

But other dog owners, of whom there are tens of thousands here, are just as adamant that sections of many local and national parks in the city should be set aside so canines can run freely while socializing with humans and other dogs.

"It's for the health of the dog," said Elizabeth O'Brien of San Francisco, who frequently brings Mo, a 2-year-old "mutt," to the Crissy Field shoreline. "He can play in the water, which dogs instinctively love to do. He can play with other dogs in a safe environment.

"As long as we have our dogs under control, we have a right to this space too."

In some ways, the debate over dogs in the Golden Gate recreation area mirrors that in some city parks. For decades, the federal government has officially banned unleashed dogs from all national parks. But since at least 1979, Golden Gate recreation

area managers, prodded by dog owners who preferred to keep their pets under "voice control," opted not to enforce those rules.

That changed about five years ago, when the National Park Service decided to start enforcing the leash laws. Three dog owners sued after receiving citations for leash violations.

Last month, a federal judge dismissed the tickets, ruling that the park's 20-year failure to insist on leashes morphed into a de facto policy allowing unleashed dogs in some parts of the Golden Gate recreation area. That policy cannot be changed without more public input, the judge added.

So the Golden Gate recreation area is in the midst of a new rule-making process that will include all sides of the dispute and likely will result in some off-leash areas. Meanwhile, dogs romp freely and legally at Crissy Field, Ocean Beach, parts of Baker Beach and other sections of the recreation area.

Similarly, dogs have been running and playing at Duboce, Sunnyside and other city parks for years, despite the fact they are not among the 26 city parks with official off-leash dog play

areas. As in the Golden Gate recreation area, police and animal control officers often have avoided enforcing city leash laws.

Dog owners and their groups want to retain de facto off-leash status at Duboce or at least see a section of the park formally set aside for unleashed dogs.

"In most of the parks in the city, everybody gets along," said Sally Stephens, chairwoman of the San Francisco Dog Owners Group. "There are dog people, and you're playing catch with your dog, and somebody comes up that wants to play football with their kid, and everybody sort of accommodates one another."

Further, say some dog owners, there should be no need for leashes as long as they can control their dogs with voice commands.

"She's more reliable and more obedient off leash, actually, than on," Michael Kelly said last week at Duboce Park as Karina, a 7-year-old German shepherd, panted nearby.

Critics, though, fume that voice control is overrated.

"It doesn't work," said Arnold Levine, who has worked on dog issues at Sunnyside Park for several years and is a new member of the city Recreation and Park Department's Dog Advisory Committee.

"That's what (dog owners) say they've been doing these years," Levine added. "And that's why we can't use our parks, because they're full of dogs that don't listen to voice control."

The debate frequently is emotionally charged. "Most of the people involved in the dialogue are cool and level-headed," said Rosemarie Dennis, spokeswoman for the city parks department. "But there are some Patrick Henrys out there, and they are on either side of the fence."

Fueling the fire has been occasional violence, such as the mauling death of Diane Whipple in 2001 or the killing of 12-year-old Nicholas Faibish last month by one or both of his family's pit bulls. His mother, Maureen Faibish, has been charged with felony child endangerment for leaving her son alone in their home with the dogs.

There have been scores of other, less tragic dog episodes. Doctors say 8-year-old Annette Rojas of Santa Rosa might have died last month had one of several pit bull bites to her neck been an inch lower. In 2003, a pit bull mix being walked by a volunteer for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals attacked a police horse, which threw its rider, injuring all four beings.

Plater charged that dog owner groups are indirectly responsible for such mayhem, because they prefer voice control of canines over leashes.

"They've promoted this idea that all dogs are never subject to any impact on people, wildlife, our parks, so long as they are under this voice control agenda," he said. "It's just been disproven time and time again."

The incidents led state Sen. Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough, to push legislation that would allow cities and counties to require the spaying and neutering of specific breeds. It has been endorsed by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom.

But Stephens said her group supports mandatory spaying and neutering for all dogs, because a focus on one breed will prod irresponsible owners to produce aggressive dogs from other breeds.

Meanwhile, there is some wag at the end of the tail at Duboce Park, where the two warring sides have fashioned an uneasy treaty that will cordon a section of the park for unleashed dogs.

"It's sort of the classic definition of a compromise," said David Troup, a co-founder of Duboce Dog, a canine owners group. "Nobody is completely happy with this plan, but most everybody seems willing to live with it."