

**Illawarra Dog Community group meeting
Saturday 6 September at 5pm
Thirroul Community Centre/Library**

The Illawarra Dog Community has 200+ members and includes a committee of people with various areas of expertise but all with loads of passion for off leash dog beaches.

A number of members from the committee spoke to an audience of around 100. FYI, committee members' names have been highlighted below.

David Hurley, chairperson, welcomed everyone.

He explained the process: that the Council survey feedback submissions are due by 6 October 2014 but this is just the short-term goal and our fight doesn't end there. The Illawarra Dog Community committee will still continue to meet and to lobby.

He said the community is horrified by the proposed changes, which as a group believes them to be unsubstantiated and unfair, and we want the proposal withdrawn.

David explained that four committee members (includes veterinarian Rick Prowse) would be meeting with a number of Wollongong City Councillors on Saturday 13 September to discuss the community's concerns. What comes out of that meeting will later be shared with the group by email.

Rick Prowse, veterinarian and owner of both Austinmer and Helensburgh Veterinarian Clinics, then spoke. He explained he has been practicing for 43 years, as both a vet and in various capacities with government bodies including former State Director with the RSPCA.

He spoke warmly about the bond between animals and humans, which helps to separate us from third world countries. He said this campaign is beyond just a desire to get on the beach with your dogs.

Rick explained there are no suitable alternatives in the Northern Illawarra – no parks like Centennial Park or Hyde Park in Sydney – our footpaths are narrow or non-existent and mostly substandard. He said people don't want to plan a week in advance to walk their dogs, and that 13+ Illawarra beaches remain unused for the most part.

He spoke about how children can be brought up being used to looking after and caring for their domestic animals. He said his wife walks their dog at least once if not twice a day on a local beach. Rick then had to leave the meeting early to try to save the life of someone's beloved dog.

Diana Messum then spoke about the mass petition, which has collected 1240 signatures in just two weeks. She confirmed that although the Council count one

petition as one submission, they do include the number of signatures on each petition so every signature counts.

Cherin Sherro then spoke, likening this cause to a political campaign. He said the Council unanimously passed this motion when we believe more than 50% of the community opposes it.

He said the Council needs to see that this has generated so much discontent and not just with a handful of people. There was a lack of evidence to support the motion and he believes the Council is ignoring the majority of the Northern Illawarra.

He explained we need to try to spread awareness into our community through handing out flyers and presenting the petition to people to sign. He put a call out to volunteers who can help in this regard on the five beaches affected as well as Helensburgh and Foragers Market on Sundays. He said it also displays a visual message that people are not happy with this proposal. The public is encouraged to volunteer via the gmail address and **Donna Bennett** or Cherin will get in touch.

He said social media is powerful but that not everyone in our community is into Facebook or owns a computer, so there is a real need for us all to spread the news – tell your neighbours and other groups you are associated with – the “old fashioned” social media. If we all share the load, we help distribute the message.

Community Dog Walk

Shane Bennett then spoke about the Community Dog Walk. It will take place on Sunday, 21 September 2014 at 9.30am from Sandon Point to McCauley's Beach and back.

People are encouraged to meet around 9/9.15am at Sandon Point car park. We envisage having speakers including instructions on how the walk is to proceed. Marshalls will be along the route to help guide participants. Please keep your dog/s on leads.

This is not just about dogs and their owners walking, we want to see all sections of our community – a sea of people in support of keeping our off leash dogs beaches off leash – people with or without dogs, surfers, with their boards fishermen with their rods, parents with their kids, everyone!

This is about sharing our beaches. The two Facebook pages include an event you can easily join. All, including dogs, are encouraged to wear green, our campaign colour (Council's green zone is off leash). An audience member reminded us of the importance to still participate, even if it's raining.

Shane put out a need for volunteers to act as marshalls on the day – please email illawarradogcommunity@gmail.com

An audience member suggested that it may send the wrong message to the media to have our dogs on lead when it's an off leash beach. **Kathy Gore** explained we have had to request Council permission for the walk and at this stage they want us to keep the dogs on leads.

Our committee also felt that it will be a more controlled event on lead – and at the end of the day it is an off leash beach but you can choose to have your dogs on leash, which as a group we choose to do.

Committee volunteers

David said if anybody else is interested in joining the committee, to please see him – people can also send an email to illawarradogcommunity@gmail.com

Petitions

David said you are welcome to take a petition and collect some signatures. People can return completed petitions to one of Rick Prowse's vet clinics, Austinmer or Helensburgh.

Media

David said the media is interested – the Illawarra Mercury had a photographer at this meeting and he is to be interviewed by a Mercury journalist tomorrow (7 September). WIN News are planning to do a story next week and David's interview with radio station i98 will be broadcast on Monday 8 September.

[Post-meeting – front page and page 4 of Mercury Illawarra Monday 8 September 2014]

Donations

David explained there are certain costs associated with this campaign, being stationery and printing costs, and booking rooms at the Library much like today. All donations are welcome and we provided a green bucket and coin tin for donations.

Margaret Wall then spoke, referring to her speech at the Neighbourhood Forum meeting on 19 August 2014.

She updated us on her FOI application, and that basically the Council had mismanaged her application but the Council envisages the requested information will be received by Margaret by 17 September, although it's very close to the 6 October submission deadline.

She explained that if a Council receives a report with recommendations, it can reject those recommendations but it does need to give reasons. She said Section 438v of the Local Government Act provides that due process by the Councillors is required.

Margaret believes we must ascertain why the Council did not follow the recommendations made and perhaps there is another agenda, unknown to us. She said any Councillor must disclose a personal connection or benefit to a proposed property/planning development.

She pointed out that Councillors must give reasons why they are not following Council recommendations and if they do not give reasons for rejecting Council recommendations, we can ask for an Independent Review by Department of Local Government or General Manager (David Farmer).

David encouraged us all to ask the same questions of our Councillors eg. what did they base their vote on, what evidence can they demonstrate?

David explained the 13 September meeting with Councillors is to engage with them. If it doesn't work, at least we can say as a group we attempted to meet with them. He believes that it will take time for Council staff to collate the information after 6 October and that perhaps the Councillors won't vote on it until sometime in November 2014.

Cherin reminded us that there is no evidence of corruption by the Council and that we don't want to do what the Council has done – to make decisions that are not based on evidence. He said the Councillors have brought this backlash on themselves, because they haven't been transparent or acted with due process.

Audience questions/comments

1. One long-term resident and business owner (Mr Crittle) said the discussion of changing the off leash beaches started with the planning and implementation of the Sandon Point housing estate. He was concerned that we may be going back to a time when our Council was found to be corrupt and administrators appointed.
2. Someone spoke of a small minority of people that are generally unhappy with dogs being on the beaches, that they will walk quickly past you with a twisted unhappy look on their face.
3. A lady (Fran) mentioned the Barristers Animal Welfare Panel on Facebook. She said guys in suits and wigs may be helpful to our cause! The group defends specific legislation which adversely affects companion animals and their rights. She offered to make contact with the group.
4. [Minute-taker found this person hard to hear] A gentleman at the back brought up the fact that once a policy is in place it's much harder to remove. He suggested we look at all the Councillors, especially in Ward 1 (Ward 1 beaches at risk) because all they'll be thinking of is their next term. It was noted that elections are not for two years' time.

5. On the subject of media, one lady said she knew a Producer for 60 Minutes and offered to contact him. She also noted Joe Hockey had a holiday house at (Stanwell Park/Tops?) and owned a dog, and perhaps needed some good publicity.
6. A Wombarra resident with two dogs had already sent emails to all the Councillors. She received a telephone call from Cr Greg Petty. He said he appreciated that her emails were not nasty. She recommended we all be low key when contacting the Councillors – to remember the 3 Ps – be passionate, persuasive and polite. She said Cr Petty admitted he hadn't decided how he was going to vote. This led to a further discussion on Cr Petty and why then he wanted an amendment to the motion and make Sharky's Beach a red zone (no dogs at any time), which was seconded by Cr Jill Merrin.

David encouraged us all to make our individual personal submissions but to also email the Councillors and repeat the same four points because if it is the same argument by many, they will have to hear what we are saying:

- I am strongly opposed to the proposed changes because there is no evidence that they are in the community's interest, there has been no transparency in the Councillors' decision-making process and the proposed policy has led to a consultation process that is deeply flawed.
- I want the original policy left in place for the time being.
- The original policy could be improved for the benefit of dog owners and non-dog owners.
- I request that a transparent and widely consultative process be instituted to establish a policy that is widely accepted and long lasting.

David said after 6 October, Council staff will collate all the information and discuss with various stakeholders and then present a report with recommendations to the Councillors. The Councillors are not compelled to agree with the report/recommendations but they must provide satisfactory reasons for not agreeing.

7. Fran spoke about Sharky's Beach and that it's really for surfers, that there are dangerous rips and rocks and children shouldn't be swimming there. She had asked the Council if they were going to commit to life savers at those unpatrolled surf beaches and they said no. She believes there is a hidden agenda.

Bernie O'Donnell said the Council has said we need to apply for a \$10m insurance indemnity liability for our Community Dog Walk.

David said we're taking the moral ground of applying to the Council for permission for the walk but we doubt we will get approval or in time for the event. We can then present to the media that we did apply, we dropped many aspects to the event in which to comply, and that Council tried to stifle our ability to run this walk properly.

8. Jennifer suggested we could look at travel insurance or our own home and contents cover if it covers us at the walk.

David asked anyone to get involved, if you have any insurance expertise, please let us know.

9. Lisa from McCauley's asked if we should present the same key arguments – yes David said they are outlined in the last newsletter and we will resend that newsletter to everyone tonight with the key points to include in submissions (**see above bullet points**).
10. A lady asked how the Council had publicised these proposed changes to our community.

Cherin replied that they didn't! He explained he saw an article in the Mercury in Oct/Nov 2013 which drew his attention that Cr Colacino did not like dogs on beaches. He was quoted as saying dogs could go to Shellharbour to poo. This sparked Cherin's interest and he started keeping an eye on Council Minutes and Agendas. He noticed a mention of the report on the Dogs on Beaches policy and put his name down to speak at that Council meeting (28 July 2014). Two other residents spoke and were anti-dog. Cherin was the only one speaking for the dog lobby. He was astounded that not one Councillor spoke up for the dog community and that the two anti-dog speakers were very familiar with some Councillors, handing notes back and forward during the meeting. He said the Councillors not only rejected the report by ignored it – it was totally irrelevant to the discussion.

11. James noted that around three years ago when the Dogs on Beaches Policy was reviewed, it took almost a year, but that was when administrators were appointed. He said there were many meetings and both sides were invited, and in the end democracy won. He believes a notice should have gone out with every rates notice to inform ratepayers about the proposed changes.

Sarah Goss informed us that she was working on establishing the Illawarra Dog Community website, which should be live in a few days and have access to documents.

12. Another lady said she spoke with Cr Connor and asked why he put up the motion for these changes and he said it wasn't his, it was Council's! There was then a discussion about semantics. Cherin encouraged those who had not, to view the webcam of the 28 July 2014 meeting and that it appears most Councillors had already made up their minds.
13. It was suggested that we have "safe businesses" where we can drop lots of flyers off for safe-keeping and volunteers can then pick them up at their leisure and distribute around the community.

14. Post-meeting, another member suggested we should establish our own political party – which could form part of a long-term campaign. We don't want to be going through this every few years.