

December XX, 2018

To the Ashland Parks Commission

I'm an Ashland resident, a professional ornithologist, and the conservation co-chair of the Rogue Valley Audubon Society (RVAS). I attended the Ashland Parks Commission "listening session" on November 26 on the topic of designating Ashland Pond as a wildlife refuge, in order to gain information about the proposal. Many Audubon members, including myself, regularly bird-watch at Ashland Pond, and we have a long-time interest in protecting the ecological values of the area.

The November 26 discussion made it clear that the main practical effect of a "wildlife refuge" designation would be to ban dogs from the area. They are currently allowed on leash at Ashland Pond, as they are at 16 of the 18 Ashland Park (the exceptions being Lithia Park and North Mountain Park).

Following consultation with the RVAS Board, I offer these comments on behalf of our group.

At the present time, Rogue Valley Audubon Society does not support the proposal that dogs be banned from Ashland Pond. This is based on the following considerations:

- the area is too small to function as an effective wildlife refuge. According to Ashland Parks Director Michael Black, the greater "Ashland Pond area" is 22.05 acres, but that includes land north of Ashland Creek and also around the wastewater treatment plant. Looking at the map shown at the meeting, I estimated that the area around the pond south of the creek is less than 10 acres, at least half of which is the pond itself. The open water of the pond is the area's only unique feature – there is plenty of the area's brushy vegetation and blackberries elsewhere.
- Although dogs can unquestionably disturb wildlife, they are not the only source of disturbance at Ashland Pond. There are noisy people, kids who throw rocks in the water, occasional fishermen, and feral cats. None of these can realistically be banned (except the fishermen – though there was no discussion of that at the meeting).
- A dog ban is likely unenforceable. I see dogs in Lithia Park every time I walk there, even though they are clearly banned. Lithia Park is much more visited and patrolled than Ashland Pond, and I think that many dog walkers would just ignore a ban at Ashland Pond.
- There is clearly strong local opposition to banning dogs. Seven people (all nearby residents) spoke in the meeting's public comments portion, and all were dog-walkers opposed to the wildlife refuge idea. They made their points reasonably and respectfully. They all rejected an equivalence between

the quiet, natural experience of walking their dogs around Ashland Pond and the alternative of the high-energy Dog Park.

Instead of banning dogs on leash at Ashland Pond, which would be a divisive and probably unsuccessful effort, RVAS proposes that Ashland Parks work with the Quiet Village community to protect the natural qualities of the area – which community members clearly value. This means recruiting them to remind other Ashland Pond visitors that all dogs MUST be on leash (a rule that is currently often ignored), and speaking to dog-owners about loud or badly behaved dogs. At the meeting, community members expressed interest in (unspecified) compromises on this issue. Enlisting their help as park guardians seems like a promising compromise that would allow dog-walkers to continue to use the area while protecting its value for wildlife.

Ashland Pond is the only pond in an Ashland park that is both large and secluded enough to provide habitat for grebes and diving ducks like mergansers, Ring-necked Ducks, and Bufflehead in the winter. Based on my observations at Ashland Pond, these birds usually tolerate quiet dogs on leash. However, noisy people, fishermen, and dogs off leash cause them to flush and leave the area. A sign at the entrance to Ashland Pond informing visitors about the special pond birds and wildlife (like muskrats and the occasional visiting otter), and urging a respectful quiet, would be an excellent addition to the area. RVAS would be interested in working with Ashland Parks to design such a sign, and possibly contribute to the cost.

We realize that the wastewater treatment plant work will impact the Ashland Pond area for at least the next one-two years, so no final decisions are needed in the near term. We also understand that additional wetlands may be constructed as part of this project, which could provide alternative quiet dog-walking opportunities in the area. If that happens, it will be appropriate to revisit the possibility of shifting dog-walking to those areas. I appreciate the open process being followed by the Ashland Parks Commission, and ask to be kept informed of further discussion on the future of this important Ashland Park.

Respectfully submitted,

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