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Plan to chase squirrels could be for the birds

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Plan to chase squirrels could be for the birds

By Ryan Hyatt

Daily Press Staff Writer

PALISADES PARK — Feed them, and they will come.

So says City Hall, which is encouraging the public to stop feeding the ground squirrels in Palisades Park. Evidently, the feedings are spurring the ground squirrel population, which has once again exceeded safe proportions and needs to be suppressed, officials said.

LA County has notified City Hall that Santa Monica's ground squirrels will have to be drastically reduced by early 2006.

To comply with the mandate, City Hall has two programs it is considering which may be effective, and also be preferred by the council and some residents, who have been critical of previous eradication methods.

In particular, City Hall will likely allow groups to perform short-term and long-term population control measures.

But animal rights groups are already taking issue with some aspect of the new program being discussed.

LA County officials classify ground squirrels as communal rodents, many of which are believed to have fleas that carry the bubonic plague — a health risk to humans and other animals when a field inspection reveals there are more than three squirrels per acre visible above ground, said Gail VanGordon, a supervisor for the vector-borne disease surveillance unit.

In addition to the visual survey, VanGordon said the county conducted two in-depth inspections at Palisades Park last March, which revealed the number of below-ground burrows had increased from 46 to 146 in a matter of weeks.

City Hall subsequently poisoned the ground squirrels to bring their numbers down to acceptable levels, and was chastised by animal rights groups for its methods. Joe McGrath, city parks operations superintendent, said City Hall had been attempting to suppress the ground squirrel population at the park since the spring, following a warning from vector control.

City Hall stopped using pesticide to reduce the ground squirrel population in late June. However, since there are no prohibitive measures currently in place to stop their growth, the ground squirrel population has grown. The City Council decided city staff should explore control measures within legal confines.

City Hall's short-term method to control the ground squirrel population would be to allow Heritage Wildlife Management, a pest control company, to live-trap the rodents over a period of six weeks. They would then be taken away from Palisades Park, euthanized and consumed by birds at a wildlife rehabilitation facility.

Judy Franz, City Hall spokeswoman, said that Santa Monica is still conferring with the county to determine if the short-term trapping and feeding method is needed. Regardless, the plan wouldn't have to be approved by the City Council.

The long-term method would involve Animal Advocates, a non-profit organization which focuses on animal rescue and education.

Over a period of one-year, Animal Advocates will eliminate unnatural food sources through community outreach. During prime feeding times, Animal Advocates will urge the public to not feed the ground squirrels.

They will also treat the squirrels for fleas to prevent disease. They have also been licensed to research with immunocontraceptives which would discourage the squirrels from eating certain kinds of food.

Franz said the two programs would incur some costs, but how much hasn't been determined. There would be costs for signs and the public education component, but the costs for trapping, if it moves forward, is still being discussed.

According to City Hall, Animal Advocates' proposal is preventive in nature. The more the public stops feeding the squirrels, the less euthanizing and feeding them to other animals will occur.

However, some animals rights groups are taking issue with the proposal. Some organizations are calling the trap-and-feed method as unnecessary and potentially counterproductive.

"The only crisis here is bureaucratic," said Catherine Rich, executive officer of The Urban Wildlands Group. "The non-lethal control plan will humanely reduce the population of squirrels in a reasonable amount of time without resorting to homemade gas chambers."

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