



PRESS RELEASE

For more information, please contact
Lori Hutzler Eckert
Lori@Eckert.com / 850-855-0055

Alaqua Animal Refuge to assume operations of Bark Park Inc.

Editor's note: High-res graphics and photos from Alaqua Animal Refuge can be found at: <http://TheLastWord.zenfolio.com/imagegallery> password: aar

FREEPORT, Fla., (April 12, 2011) – Alaqua Animal Refuge has rescued thousands of dogs since opening four years ago on the Emerald Coast, but now, the no-kill shelter and adoption center is rescuing Walton County's only dog park, Bark Park Inc. Today, the Walton County Board of Commissioners unanimously approved Alaqua Animal Refuge as the new operator of the park.

Bark Park, which is located on J.D. Miler Road in South Walton, was founded in 2006 by a group of citizens who realized the need for such an amenity in the area. Walton County, which owns the property, donated the use of several acres for the park, and a volunteer board ran its operations.

In December 2010, the off-leash park was in peril of closing due to economic reasons, and Laurie Hood, president and founder of Alaqua Animal Refuge, expressed interest in the nonprofit assuming operational responsibilities for the park. Several reports in January announced that the park lacked complete insurance coverage and county officials closed the park. However, Hood and her board were determined to save the park.

"We understand what a valuable asset the park is to our community, so we worked very hard to find the appropriate insurance coverage that would finally allow us to assume operations and reopen it for the dog lovers of our area," said Hood.

"I was disappointed to learn that Bark Park Inc. was no longer able to partner with Walton County in providing this amenity for our community," said Commissioner Ceclia Jones. "Yet, through the joint efforts of our county staff and the willingness of Alaqua Animal Refuge taking on this endeavor, I am pleased to see Bark Park reopen soon. Laurie Hood's vision for the park will bring a new vitality to South Walton and our visitors."

The park will reopen this spring as Alaqua Animal Refuge's Bark Park, and while it will be associated with the refuge, it will stand alone as a separate nonprofit, allowing for separate budgets and donation allocations. "While we see a great opportunity to have an affiliation between these two animal-focused entities, we want to make sure that donors for both the refuge and the park are comfortable with how their gifts are being used," Hood said.

Alaqua Animal Refuge's long-term plans for the park include improved landscaping, a sheltered seating area and the installation of an agility course. The park may also serve as a location for obedience training and pet-adoption events.

Alaqua Animal Refuge's Bark Park will offer a variety of annual memberships. Memberships issued by the former organization will be honored by presenting a Bark Park card. The park will also offer sponsorship opportunities for businesses interested in offering support.

"Our mission at Alaqua Animal Refuge is to save animals in need. We have not lost site of that goal, we are just broadening the possibilities of what we can do to advocate for humane treatment of animals through the great forum this park give us. We look forward to working with Walton County officials and our park members to take Alaqua Animal Refuge's Bark Park beyond an amenity, to a true community asset," said Hood.

About Alaqua Animal Refuge: Alaqua Animal Refuge, an independent, nonprofit organization located on Florida's Emerald Coast, advocates the general welfare and humane treatment of animals by providing shelter, prevention of pet overpopulation and adoption services. Alaqua, located on 10 acres in the town of Freeport, was formed by Walton County, Fla.-resident Laurie Hood in 2007 when she discovered that countless animals were being euthanized due to a lack of a no-kill shelter/adoption organization in the area. Since that time, Alaqua Animal Refuge has helped find homes for more than 6,000 animals. Currently, up to 100 animals are adopted per month from this unique rescue facility, which serves as a true refuge for more than 250 animals at any given time.