

‘Courtesy Hours’ for Off-Leash Dogs in Public Parks

November 2, 2018, Department, by James C. Kozlowski, J.D., Ph.D.

Law Review



Increasingly, dog owner groups and individual citizens are encouraging their city and county park departments to implement unfenced, off-leash areas in local parks. Due to existing ordinances, regulations and statutes (so-called “Leash Laws”), and perhaps the perceived threat and fear of governmental liability, many public park agencies have maintained a blanket prohibition against off-leash dogs in public parks, outside of fenced areas.

Questions of liability and safety may understandably arise when considering the feasibility of implementing a park policy that would allow dogs off-leash in parks under certain conditions as a more “dog friendly” alternative to fenced-in, designated dog run areas.

As illustrated by the “Juniper Park” court opinion described below, one such alternative was to perpetuate a tradition

of informal “courtesy hours” for off-leash dogs in parks. This unwritten park policy, however, generated 20 years of complaints, controversy and, ultimately, litigation by community opponents of this practice, demanding enforcement of existing “Leash Laws.”

Whether or not to create an off-leash policy for dogs is generally left to the judgment and discretion of local officials, who are authorized and charged with the responsibility to manage public parks. Accordingly, courts will not second-guess or question administrative decisions made by agencies and officials exercising their judgment and discretion to manage public parks in a manner consistent with the scope of their legal authority under state or local law.

Such immune administrative discretion would generally include decisions regarding where and when dogs could be off-leash in public parks, if at all. As a result, resolution of potential off-leash controversies and conflicts between dog owners and other park users is a public relations/political issue better left to the judgment and discretion of local government officials, not a legal issue for courts to decide.

Liability is also a non-issue. On the issue of potential liability, applicable state law would likely provide public park agencies with policy/planning immunity on the decision whether to restrict dogs in the parks, including the operational details of implementing an applicable leash law and/or off-leash policy. Moreover, the alleged failure to effectively enforce existing leash laws or an off-leash policy would

generally be immune from governmental liability under general police protection/prosecutorial discretion immunity.

Further, on the issue of potential liability for injuries to park users associated with leashed or unleashed dogs in public parks, in most situations, the role of a park agency would be limited to that of landowner. Accordingly, the mere presence of leashed and unleashed dogs in parks would not constitute an “unreasonably dangerous condition on the premises” necessary to provide a legal basis for landowner liability. On the contrary, the legal responsibility, if any, would lie with the dog owner, not the public park agency, for any injuries associated with leashed or unleashed dogs in public parks.

Off-Leash Political Controversy

In the *Matter of Juniper Park Civic Assn. Inc. v. City of New York*, 831 N.Y.S.2d 360 (11/30/2006), a nonprofit civic association, the Juniper Park Civic Association (JPCA), sought a court order to compel the city of New York (NYC) to enforce provisions of the New York City Health Code and the Rules of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, both of which required dogs in parks to be leashed. Formed in 1942, JPCA is “dedicated to preserving the quality of life in and around Middle Village, Elmhurst and Maspeth, Queens County.” The name of the organization is derived from a New York City park, Juniper Valley Park, located in Middle Village, Queens.

NYC, through the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks Department), was responsible for “maintaining, policing and administering” NYC parks, including Juniper Valley Park. Another nonprofit umbrella organization of various dog owner groups, the New York Council of Dog Owner Groups (NYCDOG), filed a motion with the court to intervene in this case.

The NYC Health Code and Park Rules govern the walking of dogs in New York City and, among other things, prohibit dogs from being present in parks without being leashed. Specifically, New York City Health Code § 161.05a, which, in common parlance, is known as the “Leash Law” provides that “a person who owns, possesses or controls a dog shall not permit it to be in any public place or in any open or unfenced area abutting on a public place unless the dog is effectively restrained by a leash or chain not more than six feet long.”

Similarly, Section 1-04 [i] of the Rules of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation provide, in pertinent part, that no person owning or possessing any animal “shall cause or allow such animal to be unleashed or out of control in any park, except as permitted by the Commissioner.”

JPCA claimed “park patrons are threatened and at risk” from what JPCA characterized as non-enforcement and “active encouragement of violations of the Leash Law,” including the Parks Department’s “own rules between the hours of 9 p.m. and 9 a.m.,” which allowed dogs in parks to be off-leash. JPCA claimed the Parks Department’s non-enforcement of applicable Leash Laws have “continued despite numerous complaints and demands for enforcement by JPCA, its members, community residents and other civic and political organizations.”

NYC denied JPCA’s claim of “comprehensive non-enforcement” of Leash Laws, but admitted “the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation (Commissioner) has granted permission for dogs to be off-leash in specified areas in some parks for the limited hours of 9:00 p.m. to 9:00 a.m.”

Unwritten Policy

Based on the record and arguments in this case, the court noted “the genesis of this dispute dates back almost 20 years” when the Commissioner at the time instituted an “unwritten policy” establishing “courtesy hours” during which dogs would be permitted to be unleashed in certain portions of parkland in the city. According to the Parks Department, this “unwritten policy” has been adopted by several ensuing Commissioners of Parks and now encompasses the hours between 9 p.m. and 9 a.m.

JPCA claimed “the Commissioner does not have the authority to enact such a policy in the face of the explicit language of the Leash Law,” as well as the Parks Department’s own “Leash Law” in its written rules.

In response, NYC and NYCDOG claimed off-leash exercise benefited dogs and their owners. Moreover, considering “the increasing proportion of the citizenry owning dogs,” NYCDOG contended society benefited from “well-adjusted canines.” Specifically, NYCDOG attributed the current vitality of all New York City parks to the single fact that dogs have been allowed to roam off-leash.

In opposition to these claims, JPCA submitted photographs, news articles and affidavits to support the claim that “park patrons are threatened and at risk” by the Parks Department’s unwritten policy, which established “courtesy hours” for dogs to roam off-leash. As characterized by the court, JPCA’s material “taken in a vacuum, would lead to the inescapable conclusion that any individual daring to venture in or near a City park would expect to be harassed by marauding hordes of vicious dogs whose owners sit idly by viewing the carnage, much like spectators in the Roman Coliseum.”

While characterizing these arguments by NYCDOG and JPCA as “philosophically interesting,” the court found their positions to be “totally irrelevant to the legal issues that must be decided.” As described by the court, the legal issue to be addressed was “the extent of the Commissioner’s authority to permit dogs to roam off-leash in parks in light of the fact that other rules apparently prohibit such conduct.”

NYC claimed that “courtesy hours” were a valid exercise of the Parks Department’s authority because “the Commissioner is authorized by the City Charter to manage the parks and establish rules and regulations for the use of same.” JPCA, however, argued that the off-leash policy was in “clear contravention of a ‘law’ which the Commissioner has decided is not binding upon him due to his office.” According to JPCA, the Commissioner “cannot usurp the legislature that has created laws for the protection of the general public.”

Administrative Regulatory Code

According to the court, JPCA’s argument exhibited “a fundamental misunderstanding of the ‘laws’ at issue.” As noted by the court, the Public Health Code was “not a legislatively enacted law, but rather, like it expressly states, a code.” As noted by the court, there was a “fundamental distinction” between a “law, or more accurately a statute” created by a legislative body and a “code.” Unlike a legislated statute, the court described a “code” as an agency’s exercise of administrative powers granted by a legislative body to “make rules and regulations” to achieve the legislative intent of a given law.

In this instance, the court found the Health Code was not promulgated by the New York City Council, but by the Board of Health of the New York City Department of Health under a grant of rule-making authority in the New York City Charter. Similarly, the court found the New York City Charter authorized the Commissioner of the Parks Department to “establish and enforce” the Rules of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Subject to the requirements of the City Administrative Procedure Act, the court further found the Health Code and the Parks Department Rules were “not only created by nearly identical processes,” but “each [is] deemed to have the force and effect of law” with “violations of each are punished as misdemeanors.”

While the Leash Law “subject of these regulations may fall predominately within the rubric of public health,” the court noted that fact did not necessarily require “the Health Code to be treated as superior or controlling on the issue of unleashed dogs in public parks.” On the contrary, while the City Health Code acknowledged the “Department of Health is the City agency with primary responsibility in the field of public health,” the Department of Health was “not the only agency in New York City with duties relating to health.” The Health Code expressly noted other agencies involved with health included “the Department of Parks and Recreation with recreational facilities and the parks.” Further, a major consideration in the Health Code was to avoid “administrative and legal duplication or inconsistency with the law and activities of other government agencies” with “their own codes and regulations.”

In this instance, the court determined the Commissioner was not attempting to “override a legislative mandate.” As a result, the court found the Leash Law provisions in the Health Code would not supersede the Parks Department Rules.

Off-Leash Authority and Discretion

The issue before the court, therefore, was to resolve the apparent inconsistency between the Health Code and the Parks Department Rules. As noted by the court, the Health Code contained “a blanket prohibition against dogs being permitted off-leash in public.” While the Parks Department Rules contained a “similar prohibition,” the court found the Parks Department Rules would permit dogs to be off-leash inside city parks when within established “dog runs” and “as permitted by the Commissioner.”

Since the Health Code acknowledged “the Parks Department’s concurrent oversight of public health issues as they relate to the City parks,” and “recognizing the Commissioner’s jurisdiction over the management of City parks and duty to promulgate rules in relation thereto,” the court concluded “the Parks Department Rules, including its exceptions, are controlling under the circumstances.”

In reaching this conclusion, the court noted that JPCA had “not challenged the propriety of the establishment of section 1-04 [i] of the Parks Department Rules, which expressly vests the Commissioner with the authority to permit off-leash activity at his discretion.” Instead, JPCA had argued, unsuccessfully, the superiority of the Health Code over Parks Department Rules.

As a result, the court found the Commissioner was indeed authorized to implement “courtesy hours” for off-leash dog activity in city parks, based on the “language of the Parks Rules, which expressly allow the Commissioner to permit such activity.” Further, the court found the New York City Charter had expressly delegated authority and powers to the Commissioner “to determine whether to permit off-leash activity within City parks.”

Enforcement Discretion

As characterized by the court, JPCA had also demanded that the Parks Department be compelled to “enforce the rule prohibiting off-leash activity during periods other than the courtesy hours”; i.e., 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. To support the alleged failure to enforce Leash Laws, JPCA had submitted sworn statements, letters and newspaper articles to show “various attacks upon park users by unleashed dogs.”

In the opinion of the court, JPCA’s “non-evidentiary anecdotal” information did not prove the Parks Department was not enforcing the Parks Rules or the Health Code from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. While expressing sympathy for the victims of these dog attacks, the court found reports of these incidents did not “constitute legally sufficient proof” that the Parks Department was “blanketly not enforcing the applicable rules through the issuance of summonses or custodial arrests.”

In response to JPCA’s anecdotal information and belief that Parks Department Rules were not being enforced, the Parks Department offered a sworn statement that its officers “may and do” cite owners for unleashed dogs outside the “courtesy hours,” as well as citing “owners who are unable to control their dogs” any time of the day.

On this issue of alleged non-enforcement, or non-enforcement in general, the court acknowledged it was “without power to intervene.” As a general legal principle, the court noted “the decision whether and in what instances police power should be exercised is peculiarly and unquestionably a discretionary function,” not subject to second-guessing by the courts. According to the court, it could not issue an order to compel a general course of official conduct; i.e., directing the Parks Department to enforce the Parks Department Rules from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., because it would be “impossible for a court to oversee the performance of such duties.”

Formalize Off-Leash Policy

While the court was “keenly aware” that it could “dispose of the legal issue presented,” it acknowledged, “the broad emotional effect of the issues raised will remain.” Accordingly, considering “the angst and vitriol exhibited” in this case by JPCA and NYCDOG, the court found “common sense would dictate that something more than an ‘unwritten policy’ governing the off-leash use of parkland by dogs which is known by few and misunderstood by many, is required in this instance.”

The court, therefore, recommended that the Parks Department follow through on its oral and written statements to the court that the Parks Department would “formalize the details of the current off-leash policy within the Park Rules.” In so doing, the court expressed its hope that the Parks Department statements were “more than mere puffery.” In the absence of a formal and clearly understood off-leash policy within the Parks Rules, the court envisioned an unacceptable alternative: “simply more endless litigation over what is, inherently, an administrative and political problem.”

Conclusion

As a result, the court denied JPCA’s petition for the court to issue an order compelling the Parks Department to “enforce section 165.05 of the New York City Health Code and section 1-04 of the Rules of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation” in a manner that would eliminate “courtesy hours” and require dogs to be leashed at all times in NYC public parks.



Ruff draft: A rendering of a future dog park in Chicago's Lincoln Yards development. Sterling Bay/Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Are Dog Parks Exclusionary?

KRISTON CAPPS FEB 28, 2019

In Chicago and other cities, the demand for pet-friendly public space has boomed. But many communities see off-leash parks as heralds of gentrification.

This is what a park for very good doggos looks like.

When it's completed over the next decade or so, the dog park nestled inside Lincoln Yards, a much-discussed \$6 billion mega-development now taking shape on Chicago's waterfront, could be the toniest pet playground in the nation. With its splash pool and pug-mug video installation—an homage to Millennium Park's famous Crown Fountain—the only thing SOM's design for Chicago puppies is missing is an oversized mirrored bone.

Humans living in Lincoln Yards will enjoy amenities as well: Plans call for a sledding hill and recreation fields among its 70-story skyscrapers. But the dogs really have it made.

"Wow, that's a luxury dog park," says Anjolie Rao, editor of Chicago Architect. "That's insane to me. I have a dog—she deserves only the best—but that's a luxury dog park." She adds, speaking of the sunny rendering of Lincoln Yards, "My first visual reaction is: That is a lot of white people with dogs."

Outside Chicago's North Side, dog parks are much harder to come by. Just one city-sanctioned dog-friendly area can be found across the entire South Side, although a few are now in the planning stage, as Zach Mortice points out in a new report on the city's stark dog park divide in *Landscape Architecture*. There's a DIY agility track called "Jackson Bark" in the park of the same name (how cute is that?). Otherwise, half of the city is poorly served by public amenities that cater to canine residents.

The other half can't live without them. In Chicago and beyond, dog parks are a reliable font of neighborhood drama, serving up listserv friction week after week, such as the stand-off between professional walkers and the local owners who consider their dog parks theirs and theirs alone. Local theater aside, dog parks represent a cherished public amenity that serves only some of the neighborhood, and can generate problems for others. Fraught or friendly, off-leash parks lead the way among the fastest-growing parks in America's largest cities.



This splashy boi competes in the DockDogs Western National Dog-Jumping Championships—not a joke—in Redmond, Washington's Marymoor Park, known to locals as "Doggy Disneyland." (Ted S. Warren/AP)

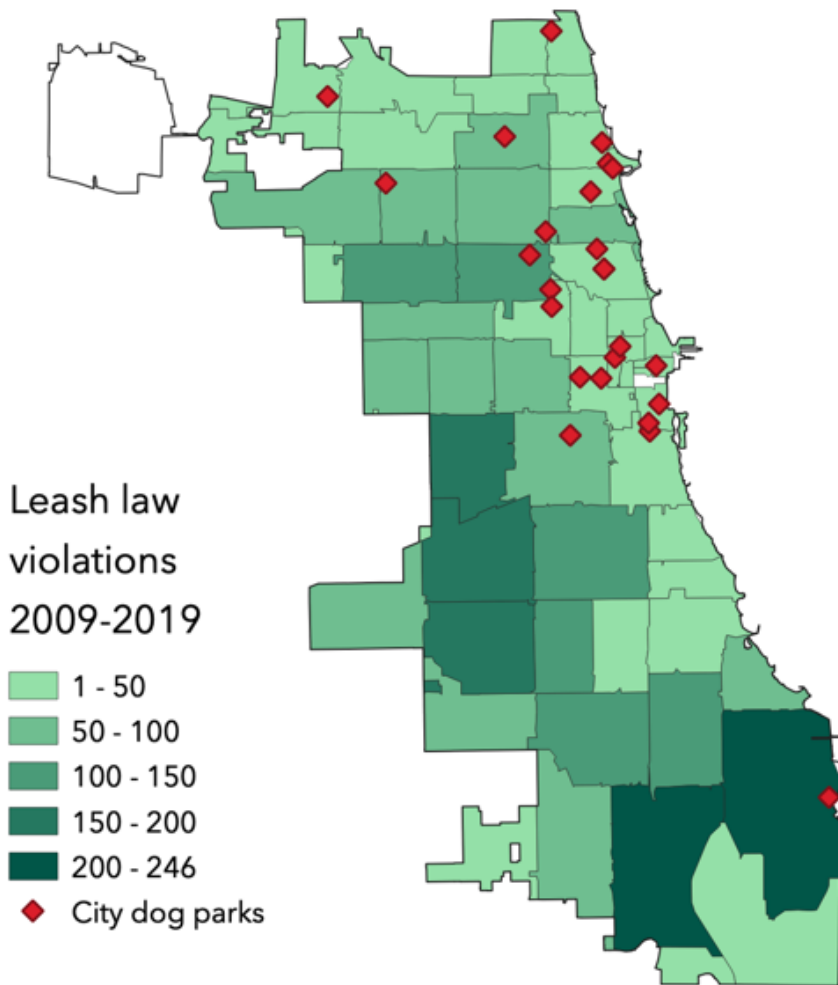
Parks and recreation departments face tremendous pressure today to dedicate more and greater space for the nation's fur-babies, even in cities where there aren't enough local parks for actual children. The rise of dog parks—up 40 percent over the last decade—has consequences for neighborhoods that have them as well as those that don't. More than half of the nation's parks departments now boast a dog park.

Back in the day, "a dog park wasn't a thing" says Kathryn Ott Lovell, commissioner of Philadelphia Parks & Recreation. "You walked your dog around the neighborhood. You took your dog around the block. Standards and expectations for dog owners have shifted. The culture of dog ownership has changed."

The fancy-town dog park in the early designs for Lincoln Yards might be among the least-divisive features of this project, which closed in on as much as \$1.3 billion in public funding (through a [tax-increment financing scheme](#)) last week. But it is nevertheless a small marker of disparity in the city—one that can be found all over. It’s a pattern whose consequences range from worrisome sign of neighborhood gentrification to outright structural inequality.

In Chicago, the unequal distribution of dog parks is more than a problem for cooped-up pooches. A city ordinance imposes a \$300 fine for off-leash dogs, who are legally welcome only in the city’s dog-friendly areas. Police disproportionately assign tickets for off-leash violations in the city’s predominantly African-American South Side, most of which is a “[dog park desert](#).”

Most Chicago leash law tickets in areas with few dog parks



Source: City of Chicago
(David H. Montgomery / CityLab)

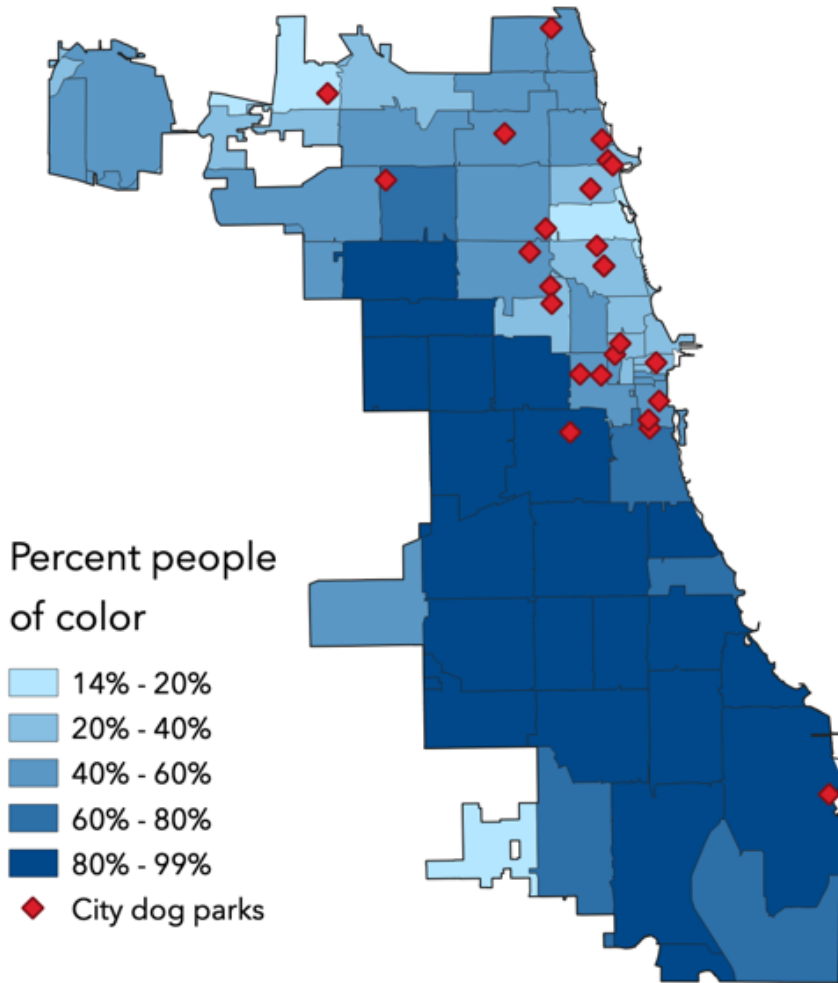
CITYLAB

Almost all of Chicago's dog parks fall in areas that are majority white, though such neighborhoods make up a relatively small part of Chicago's geography. Dog parks are such a North Side cultural force that they even have their own newsletter (*Fetch!*), a product of the nonprofit South Loop Dog Park Action Cooperative and possibly the bougiest thing since bottomless mimosas.

In no small part, white neighborhoods are rich in dog parks because they are rich, period. Chicago's parks commissioner didn't respond to a request for an interview, but a spokesperson for the Chicago Park District noted that the city's parks department doesn't fund dog-friendly areas: "These facilities are funded through Aldermanic menu, Tax Increment Financing (TIF), Open Space Impact Fees (OSIF) and community fundraising or a combination of these sources." South Side areas that lack the resources to establish formal dog parks go without them.

Which would be fine, maybe, in a sense. Nationwide, 24 percent of black households own pets, compared to 58 percent among white households. Latinx households (45 percent) and Asian families (23 percent) also have fewer pets than whites, according to Census Bureau data. So community pressure to convert vacant lots to dog parks is unlikely to be distributed uniformly across a city. Yet the consequences of *not* having a local off-leash dog-friendly area fall disproportionately on people of color in Chicago—another example of over-policing historically disadvantaged communities.

Chicago's dog parks are in mostly white neighborhoods



Source: U.S. Census
(David H. Montgomery / CityLab)

CITYLAB

In fact, South Siders are pushing for more dog parks, and five new ones are in the planning stages. They're also struggling to hold on to the ones they have. Jackson Bark, the (unofficial) agility dog-run set up on an unused tennis court, is one of the largest dog parks anywhere in the city, with hundreds of pieces of furniture for pups to practice their parkour. Nevertheless, it may be gobbled up by plans for Tiger Woods's \$60 million golf course. The development in Jackson Park — where officials are also scooping out land for the Obama Presidential Center — might include a replacement dog run. But Rao says she has some doubts as to whether park space in a public-private development will belong to the neighborhood in a meaningful way.

“With private land, there comes more opportunities for the enactment of racism,” Rao says. “People of color tend to be less welcome in private-public spaces like [private] plazas and dog parks on private property. They’re looked at with more scrutiny.”

Around the country, there’s no critical consensus among parks leaders about how, where, or whether to build dog parks. There’s good analysis that shows how much park space people require per capita, says Rich Dolesh, vice president for strategic initiatives at the National Recreation and Park Association, but the right amount of land to set aside for pets is anyone’s guess.

“If you were to do a word cloud of a day in the life of a parks commissioner, it’s ‘dogs,’ ‘trees,’ and ‘restrooms.’”

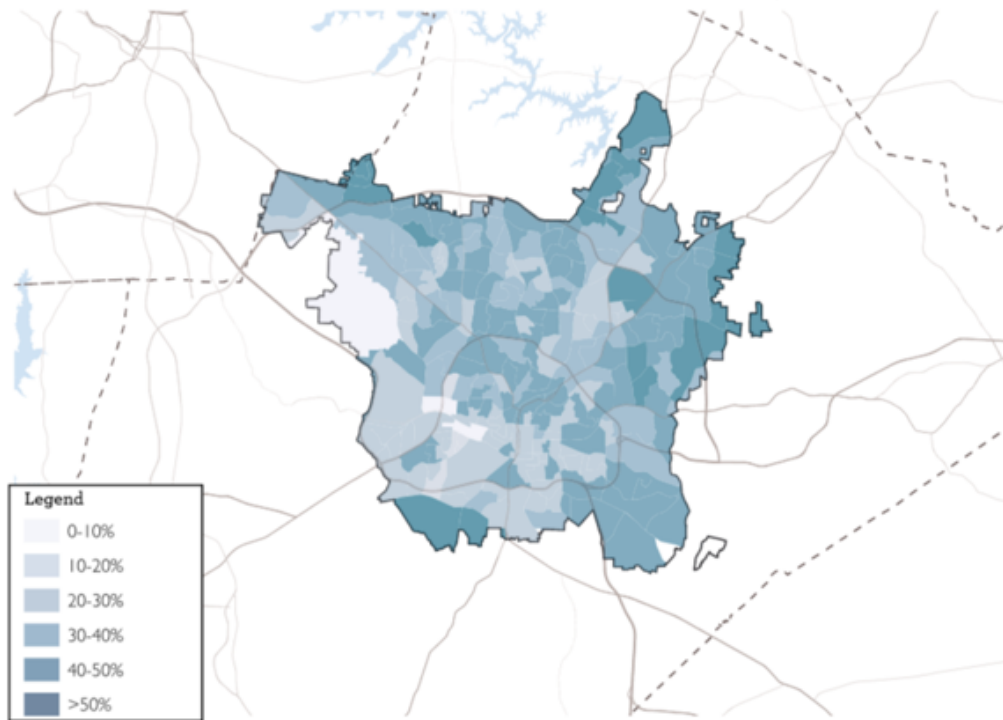
With the population of dogs in the U.S. falling somewhere between 77 million and 90 million, though, cities ignore their canine constituents at their peril. “It’s been a perennial topic among park administrators,” Dolesh says. “Dog park advocates are the most relentless and successful advocates for what they’re trying to do, [compared to] anybody else who crusades a park-and-recreation amenity in their community. We see park directors get together and gnash their teeth.”

“If you were to do a word cloud of a day in the life of a parks commissioner, it’s ‘dogs,’ ‘trees,’ and ‘restrooms,’” says Ott Lovell.

Officials in Raleigh, North Carolina, have taken a first step toward measuring the city’s canine needs with quantifiable precision. In January, Raleigh dropped what may be the nation’s first comprehensive report on dog parks. Complete with spatial analysis for dog adoptions across Wake County over the last decade as well as maps showing the density of dog-friendly apartment buildings across the city, the 2018 Dog Park Study is proof that dogs matter more than cats. (As far as canine censuses go, we rate Raleigh “14/10 would pore over its findings.”)

Raleigh’s 2018 Dog Park Study estimates that the city’s canine population will exceed 100,000 by 2023. By matching census-based household data with market intelligence (pet-food purchases, veterinary services, and so on), the city produced a map (via the mapping company Esri) showing the density of its dog-owning population. Pet demographic data turns out to be way more complicated than you’d guess, but Raleigh’s findings show that city dogs are more or less spread out homogeneously.

Dog Ownership by Household (%)



Dog ownership is fairly equally located across the city of Raleigh, according to a city census on very good boys and girls. (Raleigh Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources)

Based on input from the public, the city set a target: dog park access within a 10-minute drive, pretty much city-wide. Getting there would mean boosting the number of official dog parks from five to nine, focusing on unmet demand in north and west Raleigh.

Downtown represents a bigger challenge: There aren't any dog parks within a 10-minute walk of the densest downtown residential corridors, and there's no obvious place to build them.

"While the park resources within walking distances of these nodes are limited and already under intense pressure for many competing uses, there may be opportunity to provide temporary or permanent dog park access through some of the sites in the vicinity," the report reads. "Future park planning efforts should consider the special need in this area for dog park access."

While the 72-page report is thorough—sweeping as far as municipal reports on pets go!—it makes no mention of race or equity as factors to consider when it comes to planning dog parks. Some of the report's recommendations, from establishing dog parks through public-private partnerships or studying a membership-fee model for using them, could even inhibit access for African-American pet owners. And the data-driven report doesn't invite residents of predominantly black areas into the planning process.

"We need to start considering new ways of using existing park space for dog-friendly activities."

For black residents, ensuring equitable access to parks means more than providing proximity, as CityLab's Brentin Mock has written (about parks in another context). Detroit natives broadly rejected a free tree-planting campaign in 2014 because planners didn't take into consideration that black residents had historical reasons to distrust the city government. Especially in areas where police still use dogs to violently subdue people of color, residents might not welcome a dog park they had no part in planning. Other residents might resent these kinds of amenities, because of what they herald for the neighborhood's future.

"Long-established minority communities that [feel] the hot breath of gentrification on their necks may see [dog parks] as an unwelcome sign of change," Dolesh says. "It's like Starbucks opening in your community. Uh-oh."



A wee dog parklet outside Amazon's offices in Seattle. Prime pups have an HQ, too!
(Elaine Thompson/AP)

Facing up to the growing public demand for dog parks, especially from dog-crazy white communities, means asking big questions about small-scale land use. The questions don't get smaller when the parcels do.

"I am 100 percent pro-dog park," Rao says. "But when you're looking at dropping large dog parks in the middle of neighborhoods, it makes me feel like that land could be used for more useful things. We need to start considering new ways of using existing park space for dog-friendly activities."

Park leaders face tremendous pressure to build dog parks, even as building them triggers tremendous conflict. In affluent areas especially, residents increasingly see dog parks as basic civic infrastructure, up there with sidewalks or libraries. Some 97 percent of Raleigh residents who took part in a survey for the 2018 Dog Park Study said that dog parks "build a sense of community."

But in at least one case, building one community helped erase another one. In October, officials in Norfolk, Virginia, shuttered an establishment called the Hershee Bar as part of a planned revitalization. [Activists spent month trying to convince the city to spare the bar](#), which was Norfolk's only dedicated space for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. The city council had voted for the plan without even debating the impact on the LGBTQ community.

Only after the bar closed its doors did owners, staff, and frequenters learn that one potential plan for the site was a dog park. "I love dogs as much as the next person," one of those activists, Barbara James, told *The Washington Post*. "But our 35-year history is being torn down in this way where the city is essentially saying we're less than a dog."

Recommended



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Ultimately, dog parks represent decisions about land use, which means that they can benefit some to the detriment of others. If the rise of dog parks also brings about more leash laws or strict enforcement of these codes, then it matters very much where they get built. What doesn't get built also matters: When residents start to demand a dog park that can be described as a "[complex](#)," unless every play space for kids is in tip-top condition, then perhaps pet owners should be brought to heel.

"When you are forced to choose between those two things"—a dog park versus a playground—"it's obvious where the investment has to go," says Philadelphia's Ott Lovell. "When you're a city like us, with very very limited resources and space for that matter, the priority is pretty clear."

Creating Dog Parks - Without Rancor



JoAnne Borne (with permission)

Prospect Park; New York City

By Peter Harnik and Cerise Bridges

DOG PARKS UNLEASHED! That's how a tabloid might cover it. Or, just as plausibly, FIDO FINALLY GETS TO PLAY! Either way, the hottest new city park issue to hit America -- the skyrocketing support for creating places to let dogs run free -- has been challenging park directors, roiling communities and making headlines.

Dogs have always played a big role in city parks, but their traditional position at the end of a lead has been upended by changing mores and a rising enthusiasm among dog owners for much more active play. By one estimate there are now at least 2,000 off-leash dog areas, ranging from small parks entirely devoted to canines to substantial corners of larger green spaces—and the number is growing exponentially. From Berkeley, Calif. (site of reputedly the nation's first, in 1983) to San Antonio and Atlanta (which each opened their first only in 2003), the issue has provoked excitement and furor, with raucous public hearings sometimes running well past midnight. Interestingly, in some cases the dog park issue has badly fragmented a city while in others it has been resolved harmoniously, even adding potency to the park constituency. Why the difference?

In a crowded city where almost every square foot is precious, it's not easy for a park department to announce that some of its land will be devoted to free-running dogs. To some folks that sounds like "your dogs over my children." But from the other side of the fence, the reaction is equally strong: "My kid happens to be a dog. We all pay taxes here, don't we?"

Of all the clashes, nowhere has it gotten as bad as in San Francisco, a city with multiple park agencies and as many dogs as children.

In the 1970s, an off-leash culture began on some of the chilly, foggy and remote San Francisco beaches operated by the National Park Service. Initially, removing leashes

Contact:

Peter Harnik
Director, Center for City Park Excellence

The Trust for Public Land
660 Pennsylvania Ave., S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
(202) 543-7552
peter.harnik@tpl.org

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Dog Owner Associations

Who says dog owners (and their opponents) don't have a sense of humor?

SCOOP: Sacramento Owners for Off-leash Parks, Sacramento

KC SCOOP: Kansas City Society of Canine Owners for an Off-leash Park, Kansas City

POOP: People Organized for Off-Leash dog Parks, Nashville

PUP - People Using Parks, Oregon

PiP - Partners in Parks, Milwaukee

FIDO - Fellowship in the Interest of Dogs and their Owners, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York

ROMP: Responsible Owners of Mannerly Pets, Minneapolis

Fort Woof Dog Park: Forth Worth, Tex.

LAPP: Leash-free Alliance of Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia

COLA: Citizens for Off-Leash Areas, Seattle (and other locations)

UnCOLA: Off-leash opposition group, Seattle

was illegal because of a blanket prohibition on all Park Service land, but a special advisory group recommended an exception for portions of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Not everyone in the city approved, but it did provide an escape valve to keep off-leash dogs from running in more heavily used places like Golden Gate Park or Union Square. Then, in 2001 park naturalists realized that the populations of two threatened beach birds, the snowy plover and the bank swallow, were dropping rapidly and that it was probably due to the unleashed dogs. Suddenly park police began enforcing the leash law and handing out expensive tickets. Just as suddenly, owners began to take their pets to much smaller and more centrally located neighborhood parks run by the city park department.

In San Francisco, the second most densely populated city in the nation (after New York), even quarter-acre patches of green are dearly loved and heavily used. If one of them is suddenly peppered with dog droppings, or if someone is bitten while sunbathing, or if mothers start screaming at the owner of an off-leash dog, the whole city quickly hears about it. Perceiving a lack of leadership (the city has two park agencies which rarely communicate, plus the mayor and the city council are usually at odds), every park became a battleground. Both sides dug in, roiled by both the media and a number of grandstanding politicians. Ultimately, the Park Service brought in two organizations, the Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution and the Center for Collaborative Policy, to conduct a "negotiated rule making process," a formal consensus approach to problem solving. There are early indications that San Francisco's off-leash dog battle might eventually be amenable to a negotiation, but this particular process is federally mandated and, as such, is so bureaucratic that it can easily take years. When asked if he was surprised that a dog park issue has gone so far, Mike Eng, a senior program manager with the conflict resolution institute was appropriately diplomatic. "On the grand scale of environmental conflicts we deal with, this is low," he said, "but with the emotional attachments people have for their dogs, it is understandable."

Perhaps the real wonder should be reserved for Seattle, 1000 miles to the north, which made the civic transition to dog parks with relative ease and polish. Seattle, too, was hit by the off-leash trend in the early 1990s and, after complaints escalated, the city initially took a hard-line approach, adding more animal control officers and increasing the number of citations. Concerned about where the policy would lead, dog owners formed Citizens for Off-Leash Areas (COLA) and caught the attention of a city council member. The Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation was not the least bit enthusiastic, but COLA helped identify about 70 possible off-leash sites and the City Council mandated a 15-month pilot program at eight of them in 1996.

The pilot program made all the difference. First, it showed residents that the city was in charge and acting reasonably. Second, it taught Seattle how to identify site selection criteria that would lead to successful locations, which turned out to be: (1) avoid interference with other established uses or department-sponsored activities; (2) avoid locations directly abutting residences; (3) assure availability of close-by parking; (4) avoid locations near children's play areas; (4) choose spots where there are minimal impacts on the visual character of a park; (5) site so as to avoid spillover into non-dog areas; and (6) avoid sensitive environmental habitats.

Seattle also learned something else. "Try to find property with no history," says

A Temperament Test

Every dog park has guidelines and rules of etiquette. Commonly, owners are required to clean up after their pets and are prohibited from bringing aggressive dogs, dogs in heat, and dogs that have not been vaccinated. They are also required to be within calling distance of their pets. Some facilities are divided into “large dog” and “small dog” areas. However, Paw Run Recreation Area, a privately run dog park in Ann Arbor, Mich., takes things a step further. Paw Run requires dogs to pass a temperament test to enter.

The temperament test evaluates two forms of aggression: dog-to-people and dog-to-dog. In each test the dog’s reaction to a greeting, handling, and object possession is graded from A (“leans forward, averts eyes, relaxes posture and wags tail”), to F (“growls or tries to bite the handler”).

Though grades are not a judgment about dog’s worth, says Carolyn Kinsler, operator of Paw Run Recreation Area, “members appreciate the test, assured that aggressive dogs will not be a threat to their own or their dog’s enjoyment.”

Dewey Potter, spokeswoman for the park department. “It’s a lot easier than persuading people to change a field’s use into something different.”

Thanks to a phased-in program by a no-nonsense agency that backed up its promises with both real facilities in some places and tickets in others, Seattle’s program today is “wildly successful,” according to Potter. In fact, dogs in Seattle have even helped reclaim some parks from illegal users: in 1995, when police reported a high volume of unlawful alcohol, drug and sexual activity in three particular parks, the park department converted them to pilot off-leash areas and criminal activity soon evaporated.

There’s no doubt that off-leash areas are good for dogs and their owners. The dogs can run and cavort; the humans can stand or sit, talk or read, watch and provide comfort, if necessary. It’s pretty similar to a children’s playground and just about as much fun, even for non-dog owning passers-by who often stand at the fence and enjoy all the activity. The more enterprising sites even have playground-like props and accoutrements - sprinklers, fake fire hydrants, wading pools, bridges, tunnels and more - often in bright, primary colors (even though dogs are largely color-blind). When dogs run off excess energy they become less aggressive. When people socialize they often strengthen their community. In Seattle, off-leash areas were so successful that one pundit dubbed them “the singles’ bars of the 90s.”

There’s also no doubt that nearby neighbors are often less enthusiastic. As with playgrounds, noise is a factor, and most people have less tolerance for barking than for children’s delighted shrieks. Dog parks also take a physical beating. Even beyond issues of droppings and urine, there is no way to keep grass green, growing and healthy on any dog park smaller than about 15 acres, according to Don Colvin at Indianapolis Department of Parks and Recreation. Thus, most dog parks are surfaced with shredded bark, pebbles, synthetic materials - or, de facto, with mud and dust.

Robert E. Lee Park, in Baltimore, exemplifies the range of problems - environmental and otherwise—which can arise on an inadequately planned and managed space. Lee is not officially a dog park, but because of its relative remoteness and a lack of enforcement, it has become a popular one. “Overrun,” is how one user put it. “Families used to come to picnic, but that’s out of the question now with all the dogs running around,” he said. When the city announced that it would close the park for a year to reconstruct a bridge and to remediate soil that it said was contaminated by the dogs, owners engaged in what park superintendent Connie Brown called “civil disobedience,” cutting fences and circumventing welded steel bars. When a local citizen group pleaded for the creation of a fenced off-leash area within Robert E. Lee Park, the park department deferred the issue until a policy on off-leash areas can be established. Baltimore is a classic case of a city without an off-leash policy, without a plan of action, without criteria and without enforcement—there are only two animal control officers for 650,000 residents.

The story from Atlanta’s Piedmont Park had a happier ending. There, too, an out-of-the-way portion of the 185-acre park had evolved into an illegal but popular off-leash gathering spot. When it came time to renovate that section of the park, the Piedmont Park Conservancy realized it would have to confront the issue head-on or risk a Baltimore-like uprising. Fortunately, a solution was at hand. Piedmont Park has a number of undeveloped, unusable sections which have never evolved a culture or a user con-

stituency. One, down in a valley shielded by trees and tracks from earshot of most homes, had recently been renovated. It was there that conservancy staff, relying entirely on donations from dog lovers, erected a fence and posted rules. It has become one of the most frequented areas of the park and operates virtually around the clock. "Atlanta has no other dog park," said conservancy Development Director Kendra Cotton. "It was so desperately needed that people treat it as a gift, and take care of it." (The facility is basically self-policed by users, although after a pit bull killed a miniature pincher, the two-acre park was divided into sections based on canine size and weight, and a security patrol was added. The conservancy is also considering instituting a temperament test for dogs.)

The cutting edge in off-leash management is to do a dog park without a fence. This is relatively common in some of the sprawling cities of the west and southwest, such as Colorado Springs and Portland, Ore. Surprisingly, it's also the rule in New York City's Prospect Park.

Prospect Park is a 526-acre oasis in the heart of Brooklyn, one of the most densely populated places in America. Today it is a manicured delight of forest and field, but in the 1970s it was in shambles, a dangerous no-man's land where dogs were both a problem and a source of protection, and many of them were off-leash. With the creation of the Prospect Park Alliance and the successful effort to turn the park around, Tupper Thomas, park administrator, decided to add some structure to the chaotic situation. But she used the clock and the sign, not the fence. She allowed leash-free only in the morning and evening - and dog owners who didn't comply began receiving costly citations. She also stressed that taking off the leash was a privilege, not a right, and it could be taken away if there were problems. To defuse a potentially explosive situation, advocates formed Fellowship in the Interest of Dogs and Owners (FIDO) to maintain good communication with the park staff and to support self-enforcement of the rules. FIDO is now part of a community committee on park policy.

Specifically, here are the rules: from April 1 to October 31, off-leash dogs are permitted from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. in three specific places -- Long Meadow, Peninsula Meadow and the Nethermead - which total an amazing 116 acres; in Nethermead they are also permitted from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., but only Monday through Friday. From November 1 to March 31, the off-leash hours for all three areas are 5 p.m. to 9 a.m. seven days a week. Josephine Pittari, vice president of the Alliance, reports that off-leash problems are minimal; she attributes the program's success to good communication between the park and dog owners. In addition to some signs, the Alliance aggressively gives out cards which state clearly the rules, hours and locations.

Perhaps a more typical response was in Milwaukee. When Citizens for Public Dog Parks brought up the issue in the early 1990s, the group was greeted with deep skepticism. The county board expressed concern about maintenance costs and about slotting county land for dogs. Eventually, creativity and persistence paid off - the group located a 26-acre backwater between a highway and a river that the county owned but had no plans for. But even then, the county put most of the weight of the experiment on the backs of the dog owners by leasing the land (for \$1) instead of operating it as an official county park. When Granville Off-Leash Dog Park officially opened in the spring of 1999, Citizens for Public Dog Parks changed its name to Partners in Parks (PiP). The

county agreed to pay half the \$4,000 cost of fencing the area but it left all other expenses and management decisions to PIP, which subsists on voluntary contributions and memberships.

Fred Mennecke, board president of PIP, isn't bitter. "Milwaukee County is not a very dog friendly area, but it also has budget problems. If it were known that the county put money into a dog park, all hell would break loose." Despite its step-child status, Granville is a big success - possibly because of its dramatic landscape (stemming from the dumping of old construction fill that resulted in hills and wetlands with woods and trails), or possibly because it is still the only dog park in Milwaukee County.

In the long run, Milwaukee's experience may be more telling than Prospect Park's. Cities - Brooklyn included - need more parkland. Instead of cramming more users into existing parks, the search should be on for alternative places to take the leash off - preferably using the not insignificant political and economic clout of urban dog lovers. Dog parks can be established on vacant lots, on drainage detention sites or on former landfills. For instance, villagers in Weston, Wis., plan shortly to officially open their dog park on top of a former landfill that has been covered with topsoil and planted. They raised \$7000 for fencing, benches, and a waste disposal center for the 10-acre facility. Berkeley's Caesar Chavez Park, a closed landfill, designates 17 of its 90 acres as off-leash. (It's now the largest dog park in the San Francisco Bay area.) Genessee Park in southeast Seattle, another newly sealed landfill, includes a 3-acre off-leash area and a ball field. (Staying true to the goal of choosing land with no previous park history, Seattle is also utilizing a fenced stormwater detention site for another off-leash spot called Blue Dog Pond.)

Though dog parks are in high demand, no park department has thus far taken the step of purchasing land for one. "I don't think we're there yet," says Christine Weber of FIDO Carolina. "Normally, dog parks are added to an existing park or are part of the master plan for a new multi-purpose park." Even parks on landfills, because they are usually quite large, are designed to meet a variety of recreational purposes.

The demand for dog parks is strong and growing. This trend has the capacity to add significant power to the general park movement - or it can create divisions that debilitate it. More so than any other new segment of the park user universe (infinitely more so than skateboarders, for instance), dog owners are a constituency with clout. (The U.S. "dog economy" is estimated at around \$75 billion a year.) By communicating sensitively and by planning carefully together, park advocates of all stripes - including both dog lovers and haters - should be able to strengthen urban park systems across the board through better design, better space utilization and the acquisition of more land.

Designing and Managing Innovative Dog Parks

November 2, 2018, Feature, by Richard J. Dolesh



“How much more joy can you get out of life than being with your dog in a park?” asks Judy Trockel, one of the founders and driving forces for the past 25 years behind the dog park at Marymoor Park in King County, Washington. Marymoor Park has been called the “Disneyland of Dog parks,” not because it is highly developed with attractions and amenities, but because it is considered by all who go there as just about the perfect park for dogs and people, as the nearly 800,000 visitors per year attest.

Off-leash dog parks are one of the fastest growing type of parks in cities across the nation. According to The Trust for Public Land, in its annual survey of the 100 largest cities, the number of dog parks has grown by more than 40 percent since 2009. NRPA’s 2018 Agency Performance Review data show that 55 percent of park and recreation agencies now have established dog

parks, and, in conversations with directors of park and rec agencies, most agencies are either building a dog park or in the planning stage for one. The National Pet Owners 2017–2018 Survey by the American Pet Products Association reports 60 percent of U.S. households own a dog. With ever-growing dog ownership by American households, park agencies across the country are seeing enthusiastic demand for more off-leash dog areas within public parks.

Dog parks may be built as stand-alone parks or incorporated into existing larger parks. They are highly attractive to park visitors and often heavily used by residents and destination visitors. The size of dog parks varies from as small as a small building lot to large areas that encompass hundreds of acres and provide access to trails, lakes, rivers and even ocean beaches. But, size and room to roam are only one criteria, perhaps not even the most important, of what makes a quality dog park.

So, what are the characteristics of a great dog park? What amenities and features do people — and dogs — love in the parks they visit? This article examines what makes a good dog park great from the perspective of the designer, the managing agency and volunteer stewards.

The Designer Perspective

“I design dog parks as I would a children’s playground,” says Ken Smith, principal of Ken Smith Design Workshop, an award-winning landscape architecture and design firm in the heart of New York City. “When I started in my profession, there was no body of literature on how to design dog parks. When I started my firm, we realized that there was a great desire for areas for dogs in public places. It came up in community board meetings and other forums, and it led to a demand for the city to provide

areas for dogs. As in other parks, the expectation is that we design areas for dogs, as well as we design them for people.

“I thought that dog parks should be as interesting and fun as a well-designed children’s playground,” Smith continues. “I look at dog parks as a social space for both dog caretakers and the dogs themselves.” He believes that the philosophy of design is as important as what goes in the park.

Smith points out that New York City presents some unique constraints for any type of public park space. “We constantly adapt designs to fit spaces, and we try to get as much into the spaces as we can,” he explains. For dog parks, the key elements that must be in the space — shade, places for dogs to play, ramps and platforms of varying heights for dogs to jump and run, seating for people, water features and a dog-drinking area — all must be fit to the space in a harmonious way.

It is important to fit other essential features in the design as well. Smith notes that a good dog park needs a bulletin board because of the need to communicate with users and for users to know what is expected of them. In the East River dog park, Smith designed the bulletin board to fit in a cutout of a large, fake tree. Every dog park needs a storage shed, so, “We designed ours as an oversize dog house,” he adds.

Smith reports that during a community meeting, dog caretakers expressed a high concern about sanitation and, therefore, were very concerned about the type of surface that would be in the dog park. “No one was very excited about the idea of black asphalt, so we used brightly colored, highly durable tennis court paints to give it some life,” he says. He believes that every space he designs for people should have an element of surprise and fun, and, therefore, added whimsical touches to what might otherwise be a utilitarian space.

The Park Agency Perspective

Phil Macchia is the director of Charleston County Parks and Recreation in South Carolina. The agency owns and manages the James Island County Park, a dog park that often appears in the top 10 lists of best dog parks in the country. Macchia says, “We have a huge influx of people from around the country who visit Charleston County and bring their dogs. We are in this business for people, and people have dogs. That is just an extension of who we are — we are in the dog business, too.”

According to Macchia, the visitation at their three dog parks, which are all located within larger regional parks, is steadily increasing. In addition, they are also seeing demand within infill development areas near downtown Charleston and areas where millennials are seeking to live. “Without question, use is growing,” he says. “Our dog parks are as much a social gathering place as they are a place for people to recreate and exercise with their dogs. There is a lot of interest in small urban dog runs and mini-dog parks as well.” Macchia also notes that new urban housing and condo development are taking place where public open space is scarce, thus, there is a greater need for places for people and their dogs.

The highest priorities for visitors to the department’s dog parks, as in other parks, are that they must be clean and sanitary. “Shade is also a top priority,” Macchia says. “I can’t overestimate the importance of shade.” In addition, beyond having a place for dogs to exercise and run off-leash, there needs to be areas for people to socialize, whether under an umbrella, under natural shade, or sitting on benches and picnic tables. “And, of course,” says Macchia, “you need to address all the basics — water for dogs and people, a good in-and-out system, well-designed gates and good, clear signage to communicate expectations.”

They have separately fenced areas for large and small dogs, but Macchia notes that in their dog parks, the small dog areas get relatively little use. “We came to learn that people just didn’t like to be separated from the areas where all the action was,” he relates.

One of the challenges for them has been to maintain high-quality natural grass turf areas. “This is a challenge for everyone operating public dog parks. We have tried multiple strategies — sectioning off areas and periodically closing areas, and other actions. People just don’t want a big dirt field,”

Macchia says. The agency closes its dog parks on a regular basis to do maintenance, and it adheres to a strict schedule, which it communicates to the public. He says its maintenance schedule is communicated in multiple ways, including on its website and on signage in the dog parks. Customers have learned quickly, and the maintenance program is well-supported by the public.

Charleston County Parks and Recreation goes a step further, according to Macchia. “We want staff to be able to talk with customers knowledgeably, so we contract out with a provider who does dog training and who has excellent knowledge of dog behavior and people behavior.” Because all their dog parks are within larger county parks, there is always a staff member available to address a complaint or resolve an issue. “With high use there is the potential for conflicts. It is very important for staff to understand how to deal with people and to understand dog behavior,” Macchia says.

Charleston County parks is building a new dog park at Wannamaker Park that improves on each of its previous parks. The new 6.5-acre dog park will have additional parking, a spray pad for dogs, bathrooms and even a dog washing station. Because the agency has had such success with programming and special events at the existing dog parks, the new park will be designed to better host programs and events, such as concerts and food trucks. “We have found,” Macchia explains, “that events and programming expand our reach and enrich the user experience. Innovative programs at our dog parks open up the park to a lot more users and are really well-received by the public.”

Some of their most popular events are Pet Fest, an all-day celebration with games, agility contests and an evening concert, and include Yappy Hour, a highly popular weekly happy hour with music and food. Macchia notes that the agency has a beer and wine license and Yappy Hour is a good revenue producer, as well as a great activity for park users. One of their most popular events is Dog Day Afternoon, a once-a-year event at the end of the season in which they open the large wave pools in the regional parks to people and dogs for the last use of the year. “We had 1,400 people at our large park and 800 at our smaller park,” he relates. “We charge \$15 per dog (humans are free). We have vendors, games and activities. It is pretty cool.”

Generating revenue from operations and fees is an important priority for the Charleston County Park and Recreation system. All visitors to the regional parks pay a \$2 entrance fee for access to the regional park, but use of the dog parks within the regional park is free. While the dog parks, in and of themselves, do not necessarily generate much revenue, they significantly build numbers for annual passes and daily park entrance fees. According to Macchia, special events and programs at the dog parks are an excellent source of revenue as well. One of the best benefits of the dog parks, he believes, is that they create more opportunities for people, who might not otherwise come to the parks, to visit the parks.

The Volunteer Stewards Perspective

Judy Trockel is one of the founders of “Save Our Dog Area” volunteer group, which became “Serve Our Dog Area” in 1995. At that time, the nonprofit group took over management of 40 acres within the 620-acre Marymoor Park of King County, Washington, and established it as an off-leash, voice-control (OLVC) dog area.

“Our situation started before the term ‘dog park’ ever existed,” says Trockel, as she describes the history of how their off-leash dog area came to be. Prior to 1995, the park agency allowed a “dog training area” within the park. When the master plan for the park was updated, it did not have a dog training area identified. “It led us to form ‘Save Our Dog Area,’ and to advocate for off-leash recreation,” Trockel relates. “King County finally agreed and amended the Master Plan for the park, acknowledging the strong public demand and need for an off-leash dog area. The county entered into a seven-year trial agreement with S.O.D.A., and we have stewarded the off-leash dog area ever since.”

Trockel continues: “We were just a small advocacy group at the time, and when we received formal recognition, it was kind of an ‘Oh s***! moment.’ Now, what do we do? We realized that we just took

on a major responsibility. We had to go from being an ad hoc advocacy group to formal 501(c)3 status as an official stewardship group.

“One of the conditions we agreed to was to maintain the original condition of the park,” Trockel says. An argument against high-use dog areas is that they cause environmental degradation of the site. “This was a very important consideration for us, both because of our ideals and to forestall any future attempt to close the dog use area or convert it to another use,” Trockel says. “At the hearing, a man stood up, wagging his finger, and said, ‘I guarantee you that in seven years that area will be destroyed by the presence of dogs,’” she recalls. “Twenty-three years later, we are very proud of our record in keeping this park in as good a shape today as it was then. It is a beautiful area along the Sammamish River. There are six miles of trails, five river access points, and fields and forests to recreate in. We have a beaver pond, a heronry and beautiful scenery.”

Trockel believes there are three important criteria for having a great dog park. First, the size of the park needs to be large enough to handle the use. Second, you need to have a citizens’ stewardship group involved. “No matter how many park staff the agency has,” she says, “there is always a shortage of maintenance staff.” Third, the park agency (city or county) must allow the park to be successful. This has been very important for their dog area. “Groups ask me, ‘What do you mean by that?’” Trockel says. “I mean that they let us take charge of the park and let us do what had to be done. They didn’t tie us up in bureaucracy, but, when we needed help, they extended a hand in partnership and helped us when we had jobs that were too big for us to handle alone.”

Trockel believes the park agency has a high degree of trust in S.O.D.A., because the group established credibility with the agency over the course of many years. “It didn’t just happen overnight,” she relates. “We built trust, and we, in turn, support the park system in many ways. It is a great partnership.”

When it comes to managing use with an all-volunteer group, Trockel says the key is to communicate our founding philosophy and to communicate it frequently to our volunteer stewards and to park users. We nurture the concept of stewardship — everyone is responsible for the park. “This is what makes our dog park truly innovative,” she proudly says.

In terms of managing the dog park, “Off-leash does not mean out of control,” Trockel says. “It is not our responsibility to control your dog. It is yours. If your dog is not responsive to your voice control, and you don’t have sufficient recall skills, maybe you shouldn’t come to this park. Our group is not an enforcement group. We are a stewardship group.

“Dogs are a part of life today,” Trockel adds. “They have gone way beyond their purpose for hunting and herding. People have a love of them as they do their children. We serve the need for allowing people to enjoy and recreate with dogs into their daily life.”

Dog Parks

November 2, 2018, Department, by Anne-Marie Spencer

Member to Member



Promoting vibrant, active people, dogs and community

According to numerous reports, spaces where dogs can play off-leash are the fastest-growing feature in parks today. Dog parks are sought after by pet owners for multiple reasons. They provide socialization for both pets and their owners. They bring people of all walks of life together in a space where they can form bonds and friendships based on their shared love of dogs. For dogs, especially ones whose owners work long hours, regular dog park visits can provide an outlet to expend stored energy.

While demand stems from a growing number of individuals owning a pet, the value and benefits of these spaces

extend beyond pets and their owners — making a statement about a community's commitment to offering amenities that attract a richly diverse and active population. To better advocate for off-leash dog parks, it is important to understand the demand for these spaces and the benefits for dog owners and the broader community.

As populations grow, and leash laws become more restrictive, many municipalities see dog parks as a way to allow pets to play without impacting traffic, infringing on private property or potentially creating unwanted litter on public streets. While dog parks are certainly welcomed by dog owners, the value and benefits of these spaces extend far beyond the dog community.

Multiple Benefits

Dogs encourage people to walk more, and research studies show that at the individual level, being outdoors in a dog park offers diverse therapeutic, physiological, psychosocial and psychological benefits. It has been found that owning a pet is directly linked to fewer visits to the doctor and improved overall health.

Dog walking has been examined as a mechanism for promoting moderate physical activity, providing physical health benefits that link to a decrease in risks of cardiovascular diseases, such as hypertension and high cholesterol. In addition, it has been found that individuals who own a pet are more likely to participate in outdoor activities and are generally more active, healthier and more sociable, even with individuals they don't know well.

Dog parks provide important community benefits as well, and are important outlets for humans, as they provide recreational opportunities and bring together dog lovers of all ages and socioeconomic status. Dog parks promote walkable neighborhoods, an enhanced sense of community and safety, because the pet owners are not walking on busy streets. They also provide a place for owners to converse and get information about dog-related services and about the community in general. They serve as a conversation starter, and nearly half of the people who responded to a survey indicated they had become acquainted with other people in the neighborhood through their pets. From a pet ownership perspective, public dog parks allow dogs to get ample off-leash exercise and social activity with other dogs, promoting a decrease in the level of troublesome behavior.

Rejuvenate Underutilized Parks and Spaces

Dog parks can be created to suit any size space. Even in airports, where space is at a premium, dog parks are cropping up as a much-needed amenity for travelers and their pets. They can also be used to rejuvenate underutilized parks and spaces. The city of Gahanna, Ohio, used Pizzuro Park, an underused space in a floodplain, to create a dog park with four areas: two for large dogs, one for small dogs and another for agility-based activities. The dog park has made Pizzuro one of the most visited parks in Gahanna. Stockbridge, Georgia, also used a repurposed floodplain in its Clark Park to create an oasis for dogs and their owners, designating about an acre of the park's nearly 12 acres for the new dog park. The city used the space creatively, installing plantings and paths to absorb rainfall at the lower elevations of the park and placing the agility equipment at a higher elevation. Where needed, an underdrain system was installed to help divert stormwater to a pond, creating more effective drainage after heavy rainfall.

No matter the size, all dog parks start with community support. Be sure to hold meetings within the community where you are planning the dog park, and allow community members to share their thoughts. Be prepared to deal with concerns, as well as encourage advocates, by having a master plan in place to share proposed hours, rules and maintenance. Much of the concern about dog parks comes from people not understanding how the space will operate, so being able to address these concerns early will help build advocacy. If there is a dog expert who can be present, invite them to address concerns that non-dog owners may have. Dog parks encourage social behavior in dogs and park rules help address most potential issues, so being able to articulate this is an important step in neighborhood support.

In addition to providing owners with a place where their dogs can get the daily movement and activity they need, community dog parks also can be a place to train and familiarize them with the skills required to master playful obstacles or compete in the sport of agility. Dogs love the opportunity to run and play, while owners also enjoy the opportunity to socialize with each other, so including a mix of amenities that promotes enjoyment for both is an important step in creating a well-loved dog park. Amenities help dogs build confidence, strengthen muscles and build challenge by incorporating elevation changes, jumping and moving through unfamiliar spaces. They also help the owner get exercise. Dog owners will also appreciate shady places to sit, access to water fountains and restrooms, and waste/litter receptacles to help ensure the space stays clean. Be sure the dog park rules are posted prominently at each entrance.

Don't forget the importance of marketing the space to ensure usage of the dog park, as well as promote knowledge of rules, hours and other useful information. Add the information to your park website, and if you have staffing to manage it, create a Facebook or other social media page to help promote the site, events at the dog park, contests and serve as a place for photo submissions of people and their pets having fun! The Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission operates three dog parks and hosts several events, designed to bring pet owners together and generate revenue to support maintenance of the dog parks. Their popular Yappy Hour event includes live music, food and beverages and is one of many events that helps to ensure the dog parks remain clean and welcoming.

Dog parks are one of the fastest-growing amenities in public spaces, and the benefits of these off-leash spaces are clear. As people continue to move to urban centers and the trend of bringing the family pet along gains strength, the demand for spaces to exercise and socialize with their pets continues to expand. By including dog parks in our overall master plans, we can help extend health benefits to people and improve the quality of life and community capital across the country.

Material Considerations for Comfortable, Active Dog Parks

- Accessible route of travel from parking lot to and through the space
- Separate areas for large and small dogs
- Dog park rules posted prominently at entrance
- Separate entrance to park transition area, as well as to small and large dog areas
- All areas fenced with a solid base to discourage digging
- A good mix of agility equipment to accommodate large and small dogs
- Strategically placed lighting for extended hours
- Dog waste bags and receptacles
- Shaded benches to encourage socialization
- A mix of surfacing to emulate nature and offer walking paths
- High-low water fountain to accommodate both dogs and their owners
- Trash receptacles to promote park cleanliness
- Bike parking to encourage alternate modes of travel
- Trees and shrubs to provide aesthetics and shade

For more information on planning a dog park, request the free resource, [*Unleashed: Off Leash Dog Park Design Trends and Tips*](#).

[*Anne-Marie Spencer*](#) is the *Corporate Vice President of Marketing for PlayCore*.

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Dogs in Parks: Managing the Waste

November 2, 2018, Department, by Richard J. Dolesh

Conservation



In a word, it's about the poop.

Environmental management of dog waste has become a more pressing issue for park and recreation agencies as the percentage of households with dogs increases and the demand for dog parks continues to grow. However, dog waste is not a responsibility that many people within park and rec agencies, want to deal with. Considering the otherwise stellar environmental performance of most park and recreation agencies in addressing environmental and waste issues, dog waste just doesn't seem to rise to top of the design, maintenance and management menu. In fact, for many dog parks or off-leash dog areas managed by parks, once the dog waste is out of sight after flushing it off pads or dog areas, it is out of mind as well.

The scope of the problem of dog waste in America is huge. America's nearly 90

million dogs produce about 11 million tons of dog waste per year. A widely quoted estimate of the volume of dog poop by a commercial dog-waste collection company, named Doody Calls, is that it would fill a line of dump trucks stretching bumper to bumper from Boston to Seattle.

The stark fact is that only about 60 percent of dog owners pick up after their dogs; 40 percent do not. This seems to hold true with some exceptions on the type of area according to studies done in parks, in urban communities, and in suburban areas.

A 2017 Penn State University study of dog waste for the Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics Center in Open Space and Mountain Parks of Boulder (Colorado) found that dog caretakers with dogs on a leash were most likely to pick up after their dogs and dispose of the waste in receptacles. However, park visitors with dogs said the infrequent number of pet waste stations made them less likely to pick up and dispose of their dog's waste.

The problems are not just from the solid waste and nutrients that can wash into local streams and lakes, but also the potential for spreading pathogenic bacteria and viruses, including *E.coli*, salmonella, cryptosporidium and a range of intestinal worms and parasites that can be transmitted to other dogs and mammals. Numerous studies have shown that much of the bacteria in urban waters comes from pet waste.

Tackling the Problem at the Source

Prince George's County, Maryland, is meeting the problem head on. The county has launched a comprehensive effort to deal with dog waste in its communities and has applied several creative and innovative strategies to get people engaged.

Dawn Hawkins-Nixon, the associated director for sustainability for the Department of the Environment (DOE) in Prince George's County, says that the catalyst for their initiatives was the granting of the county's MS4 permit in 2014. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regulates the conveyances of stormwater into the waters of the United States, and Prince George's County's permit contained a requirement that the county reduce harmful bacteria levels in the Anacostia River and Piscataway Creek watersheds.

This requirement coincided with the growing concern residents expressed to the county about pet waste in common areas. "The lack of responsibility by pet owners was a major concern by residents, who wanted us to do something about it," says Hawkins-Nixon. This led the DOE to begin a comprehensive program of education and awareness intended to change peoples' behavior. The scale of the problem is significant, according to Hawkins-Nixon. DOE estimates there are 150,000 dogs within the county that produce 37,400,000 lbs. of waste per year. Since only 60 percent, at best, pick up, this leaves 45,000 lbs. per day that is, essentially, untreated sewage.

"We realized this could not be just a traditional paper campaign with signs and flyers," Hawkins-Nixon shares. "We knew we had to engage residents and school-age kids. We developed games and educational materials and made them bilingual as well." The agency was also innovative in its outreach. One of the games staff took to community events and schools was a bean bag pooper scooper game, where kids got points for depositing their "dog waste" in the proper receptacles and waste stations. Hawkins-Nixon says that the gross-out factor drove kids wild with delight, and it proved to be an effective way to communicate their objectives. Another innovative approach Prince George's County has taken is to hold Pet Waste Summits — one in 2017, one in 2018 — that drew more than 75 people representing various community organizations.

The DOE partners with the University of Maryland's Environmental Finance Center and the People for Change Coalition and has developed a small grant program, using stormwater management fees, to provide pet waste stations and signage to communities. They have provided local communities with 86 stations so far and plan to have 146 placed by 2019. Debra Weller, environmental section head of DOE, says that local communities have been extremely supportive, and the messages of public health, environmental quality and community appearance have really resonated with residents.

Many of these inner Beltway communities in Prince George's County are integrally linked to the stream valley parklands of the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), which connects communities to these linear parks by trails and by community and neighborhood parks. MNCPPC also owns five dog parks, which are popular and well-used, within these communities. Reducing the impacts of dog waste pollution from dog parks and within the larger community requires a full effort by county agencies and community organizations.

According to Hawkins-Nixon, the county agencies and community organizations are looking at ways to make the campaign sustainable and renewable. They are building capacity with their organizational partners. "It makes a big difference when a community takes ownership. It is so much more meaningful than when residents are being told they need to do this by the government. When a community invests in an effort, it has a much better chance of success," Hawkins Nixon explains.

The bottom line is that the county is improving public health, reducing runoff into streams and waterways, and making communities more of a place to love and appreciate. "It's great to be able to go out to public places and play with your kids safely," Hawkins-Nixon adds.

Prince George's County has recognized the problems presented by the high percentage of dog ownership and taken a direct and energetic approach to address the challenges. Park and recreation agencies with a commitment to environmental and public health must take notice of the impacts dog waste has on their communities and dog parks and forthrightly acknowledge the problems and deal with issues. Our parks, trails and streets will be much cleaner and healthier for dogs and people.

Making Space in Parks for Dogs

November 2, 2018, Department, by Diego Martinez

Community Center



How can parks and recreation strike a balance that pleases everyone?

The two sides of the aisle took their seats for what promised to be another fervent debate in our nation's capital. On the agenda: the inclusion of a dog space in the renovation plans of a community park and recreation center.

In one camp, residents highlighted the merits of a dog space, including having an enclosed area for their dogs to run freely and creating a space for conversations and connections between dog-loving owners. In the other camp, residents noted how they often clean up after other owners' dogs and that a dog

park would invite more dogs into their community, enlarging their maintenance concern.

These issues are not unique to this quiet, small community in northwest Washington, D.C. As cities continue to evolve and demographics reshape neighborhoods, ideas and visions for the futures of the communities must coexist. When community ideas and visions inevitably differ, how can we strike a balance that pleases everyone? In addition, if a dog space is included in a park's plans, how do we ensure that all parties remain engaged throughout planning, construction and beyond the project's grand opening?

By understanding the makeup of the neighborhoods in question, using creative thinking in the planning of a dog space and securing a sponsor to manage the space, the addition of a dog space can ultimately be a community asset.

Navigating Community Engagement

City and neighborhood profiles and demographics are dynamic. People migrate in and out, reshaping the identity of the community. When considering the addition of a dog space within a larger park space, it is important to understand and project the future needs of the community.

The challenge for park and recreation planners is to capture the voices of those who not only bark the loudest, but also of those who stand in the background. Hosting a community survey during the dog space planning process allows park planners to capture as many diverse values, voices and opinions at a time when the ability to change project requirements is easiest.

For example, prior to the previously mentioned community meeting in the District of Columbia, a survey was conducted that asked participants for, among other things, demographic information, park usage, preferred park amenities, areas of improvement and the implementation of a dog space. At a quick glance, it was evident that a dog space was a hot topic; however, merely taking a tally of who was for or against a dog space was insufficient information when planning and allocating public funding.

Through simple cross tabulations of the survey results, the planning team developed a narrative based on the residents' responses. The results showed that the lack of a dog park correlated with lower park-usage rates among respondents over the age of 50. Moreover, young families, ages 25 – 49, with low park-usage rates noted both dogs off their leashes and the lack of maintenance by dog owners as key drivers for them steering clear of the park. From the survey results, the planning team had evidence to support the idea that incorporating a dog space would satisfy the dog owners and ease the safety concerns of young families.

While not all survey results may provide a clear definition or path toward a park's future, ensuring that you capture diverse voices within the community is essential to producing accurate and useful results.

Let's Build a Dog Run!

The community has spoken, and a sizable faction is advocating for a dog space in the neighborhood; however, city space is becoming increasingly valuable and limited. According to the municipal regulations in Washington, D.C., "the creation of dog parks in the [city] requires a certain degree of flexibility due to the density of buildings, as well as the scarcity of District-owned parkland." The challenge becomes how to balance the dog owners' needs with the requests of other residents for a playground, fitness equipment and leisure space.

One solution for developing city parks is the inclusion of a dog run. Dog runs are functional, fenced-in space, usually a minimum of 5,000 square feet, where neighborhood dogs can run freely, exercise and socialize. Whereas a dog park is larger and may include architectural and landscaping features, furniture for patrons, drainage and pet-friendly surfaces, a dog run provides the essential features that will keep dogs happy and healthy, including a 5-foot fence, drinking fountains, waste bags and a surface that is both pet-friendly and sustainable.

By building a dog run, you not only address the needs of dog owners, but also of families and other residents. Dog spaces can be divisive, but if you include a dog run alongside other amenities, such as playgrounds and blacktops, the community may feel more receptive to including a space for dogs.

The Guy Mason Recreation Center in Washington, D.C., is an example of successfully integrating a dog run. Through a thoughtful analysis of the community's needs, a 250,000-square-foot space was developed that included a 6,400-square-foot dog space, baseball field, renovated recreation center and playground. The park and recreation center provides space for dogs to run freely and exercise, while reserving space for recreational sports, striking a balance between community needs.

While there is no one-size-fits-all for dog spaces, dog runs provide the flexibility to address multiple community needs. Ultimately, it is up to the city and park planners to develop a dog space that fits within the community's vision.

Maintaining a Dog Run

It is dusk at the community's new dog run, the last of the wagging tails have gone home, but a lingering smell remains. Whether it is dog-waste removal, fixing a fence or maintaining the field surface, how will the community address issues critical to the quality of the dog run? With tight budgets, park and recreation departments do not have the resources to consistently monitor and maintain dog spaces. Securing a dog run sponsor for maintenance, management and rule enforcement is vital to the health and longevity of a dog run.

Securing a dog-run sponsor during the planning phase allows the sponsor to be invested throughout the buildout process. In certain jurisdictions, the sponsor is responsible for submitting a formal proposal for the establishment of the dog run during preliminary community meetings. Sponsors can be residents, organizations or businesses with a nonprofit interest in the community. While any community member can volunteer to become a sponsor, having a broad base of engaged and committed sponsors mitigates the risks of people moving out of town, a lack of community volunteer work support and waning interest over time. According to the DC Department of Parks and Recreation, the most successful dog spaces are managed by a board of directors and have a minimum of 10 volunteers who are willing to assist with maintenance, fundraising and volunteer recruiting.

Once a sponsor is secured, it is critical to outline the roles and responsibilities between them and the city park department to manage expectations. These roles and responsibilities will serve as a reference point if the park becomes a liability for the community. Not every owner will be responsible and clean up after his or her dog. Over time, the dog run will exhibit wear and tear. It is important to outline how often sponsors are required to review the facility's state, how to communicate issues within the community and how to resolve issues.

Considerations for Planning and Maintaining an Urban Dog Space

Urban neighborhoods are trending toward adding more dog spaces. Research from the Trust for Public Land notes that off-leash dog spaces are sprouting in larger cities at a faster rate than other park types. Also, as the rate of dog ownership increases, city space for four-legged "children" to roam freely and tire out increases in demand. However, if residents seek to maintain existing amenities, such as playgrounds and blacktops, can city planners incorporate a dog space in a manner that allows all stakeholders to coexist?

Such limited space forces city and park planners to think strategically and to be creative with land allocation. Hosting temporary pop-up dog spaces offers park planners the flexibility to introduce dog spaces in neighborhoods. In addition to city-owned parkland, city and park planners may shift their attention to underutilized alleys or rooftops that can be developed into a dog space.

Something else to consider is that many apartment buildings in cities now offer amenities, such as a space for dogs to run and exercise. So, are there sufficient private dog spaces that minimize the neighborhood's need for a public dog space? Are there opportunities to engage in partnerships with private dog spaces to allocate public spaces for other recreational activities?

In answering these questions throughout the park planning process, the development of public space for either a dog run or other amenities can be a positive experience for all community stakeholders!

NRPA Park Pulse: Americans Agree Dog Parks Benefit Local Communities

November 2, 2018, Department, by National Recreation and Park Association

Research



Local parks and recreation agencies provide dog parks for the areas they serve

Each month, through a poll of Americans that is focused on park and recreation issues, NRPA Park Pulse helps tell the park and recreation story. Questions span from the serious to the more lighthearted. With this month's poll, we look at the possible benefits dog parks bring to their communities.

91% of Americans believe dog parks provide benefits to their communities.

Availability of dog parks is especially popular among millennials (94 percent)

and Gen Xers (92 percent) followed by baby boomers (89 percent) who agree dog parks provide benefits to communities.

Top 3 Community Dog Park Benefits:

- 60% Gives dogs a safe space to exercise and roam around freely
- 48% Allows dogs to socialize with other dogs
- 36% Allows owners a chance to be physically active with their pet

Visit www.nrpa.org/Park-Pulse for more information.

The National Recreation and Park Association survey was conducted by [Wakefield Research](#) among 1,002 U.S. adults ages 18+, between September 11th and September 18th, 2018, using an email invitation and an online survey. Quotas have been set to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the U.S. adult population 18 and older.

The Dog Park Study survey was designed to help the city understand who, why, where, when and how often people use Raleigh’s dog parks. In addition to gathering public input about the types of amenities and design features they value, determining where the city should invest in building future dog parks was a core goal of the process. When asked how far they were willing to walk or drive to a dog park, most survey respondents said 5–10 minutes was a reasonable amount of time. This feedback was layered with data from other spatial factors, such as adoption records, concentrations of dog ownership and locations of dog-friendly apartments to identify those areas of the city that were likely to have the highest unmet need for dog parks.

Community outreach was organized around a series of dog-friendly special events hosted throughout the spring and summer, including five pop-up dog parks at various locations around downtown Raleigh. These pop-up dog parks were created using temporary fencing to convert underutilized spaces into a dog park for a day or weekend at a time. In addition to direct outreach at special events, opportunities to participate were advertised at existing dog parks and through geographically targeted social media ads to underrepresented areas of the city. Public input was primarily gathered through an online community survey and interactive public message boards on the Dog Park Study project [website](#) .

Over the course of the six-month public outreach process, more than 4,000 people attended the various dog-friendly pop-up events, 500 unique comments were captured through online message boards and more than 1,200 participants took the Dog Park Study survey. In September, following several months of public engagement, a Key Issues Report was published online along with focused questions addressing the most important and controversial issues that had come up during the process. The feedback gathered through this Key Issues survey was incorporated into a draft Dog Park Study report. In October, this draft plan was presented to the PRGAB in a public forum, with further discussions and final board recommendation anticipated in November. The final plan is expected to be presented to Raleigh’s City Council in early December, wrapping up the year-long Dog Park Study process.

The Recommendations

By taking the time to engage city residents across multiple channels, Raleigh obtained the data necessary to inform future planning, design, delivery, operation and maintenance, and creation of policies for its public dog parks. The Dog Park Study report provides a set of recommendations organized around five Key Issues: dog park access, policy, design, stewardship and options for a downtown dog park. These recommendations are accompanied by a menu of implementation strategies, acknowledging that meeting the growing demand for dog parks will require a mix of traditional dog park construction, expanded dog-friendly programs and special events, increased civic participation and partnerships between the city and private development community.

Several areas of community consensus also emerged from the Key Issues survey, including that participants were against requiring memberships for dog park access and wanted to maintain the current dog park policy, which stipulates that “dogs are only allowed off-leash in Raleigh’s public parks if they are within the secure, fenced area of designated dog parks.” To read the entire study, including the Appendices that contain dog park design guidelines and a pop-up dog park handbook, [click here](#).

“The Dog Park Study process had an incredible impact on how we view these facilities, and how they function as part of a complete park system,” says T.J. McCourt, planning supervisor for the City of Raleigh Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department. “We understand now how important they are — not just as places for dogs, but places for people.

“The most surprising finding to me was the number of people who told us dog parks are the only reason they visit our public parks,” McCourt continues. “That tells me these facilities reach a segment of the community we would otherwise miss. For many people, dog parks provide a social value and community benefit that go far beyond simply ‘areas for dogs to get exercise.’”

Conclusion

Dog parks are as much for people as they are for their pets. People are also a critical element in the success of any dog park system. Time and dedication on the part of volunteers, who help to “enforce rules, report incidents, stock bag dispensers, maintain and spread mulch, and take on many other essential tasks that keep our dog parks clean and safe,” are crucial. Also crucial are donors who, through individual giving or corporate sponsorships, are willing to contribute to the establishment and maintenance of these facilities. As this study reveals, building a successful system of dog parks requires the investment of many players across various city departments, public-private entities and city residents.

The 'Dogification' of America's Parks

November 2, 2018, Department, by Beth A. Miller

Community Center



Wagtown® research shows off-leash options attract park users

Long ago, dogs roamed free without rules or owners. Times have changed. Dogs don't have owners, they have families. People are deciding where to live, work and play based on dog-welcoming infrastructure and policies. This presents opportunities for park professionals to embrace this growing relevance driver.

Wagtown , a nonprofit dedicated to setting responsible and genuine standards for authentic dog friendliness and the nation's leading dog-friendly community expert, interviewed more than

400 leaders across the country. Following two years of intense research, we have insights from economic development, land-use planning, tourism, law enforcement, animal advocacy, park and recreation administration, park users and more. Front-runners see a surge of interest in dog-friendly open spaces like we've never seen before. In its [Unleashed: Off-Leash Dog Park Design Trends and Planning Tips guidebook](#), PlayCore, a company focused on building communities through play and recreation, states: "Dog parks help both pets and owners increase enjoyment for the outdoors, while providing a wealth of additional health and well-being benefits, as well as social and community advancements."

Park districts are embracing dog lovers because dogs bring their owners along for the run, hike, walk, paddle or to just enjoy the serenity of the open space with their best friend. Dog-friendly areas are safer because dog walkers are hypervigilant patrollers of their parks. In addition, regardless of socioeconomic background, American park users are increasingly counting Fido as one of the family. This gives parks a key to the hearts of their user constituents regardless of race, education, income, interests, etc.

New attitudes about dogs mean changing expectations for park services. Leaders recognize the value of dogs and their role in parks, but there isn't a quick answer on how to react to the demand. There is not "one right way" to create an off-leash experience. Three well-recognized categories for off-leash play are noted in Seattle C.O.L.A. (Coalition for Off-Leash Areas) [Best Practices Report](#). These categories are especially helpful in high demand and urban areas where mixed use is necessary.

Option A: Off-leash dogs under voice/sight control are free to share recreational space with non-dog users where indicated within specified times.

A great example of this format can be found in bustling New York City, where several dozen dogs can be found before 9 a.m. and after 9 p.m. on “The Hill” of Central Park. The busy urbanites scurry through the streets seeking green respite for their dogs.

Wagtown visited the park in 2016 and found that users understand that responsible dog ownership is critical to the success of the experience they treasure. Because the dogs come regularly to a well-maintained area, their social game is stellar. Then, like clockwork, when time’s up, you can hear the clicking of leashes on collars as they gather up their floppy-eared family members and head elsewhere.

Option B: Off-leash dogs under voice/sight control are free to share recreational space with non-dog users where indicated in specified zones of the park.

These areas encourage users to share recreation space with dogs in a safe and equitable way. Because it is important to allow some buffer zone, some areas may be too small to combine groups.

In Redmond, Washington, there is a community park with one of the most inspiring off-leash areas in America. Marymoor Dog Park (www.soda.org/volunteer-at-marymoor/) is well-planned and supported by the community leadership and the grassroots organization, Serve our Dog Areas (S.O.D.A.).

S.O.D.A. has developed and sustained a volunteer effort to provide assistance in dog spaces. From fence installation and repair to dog wash stations and coffee bars, members of the dog community have rolled up their sleeves and contributed to an incredible experience for dogs and their owners. The parks have provided guidance, materials, training and a financial commitment to help maintain excellence.

They have installed wayfinding, site signage and natural barriers and offer specialty vendors. Visitors can enjoy a cup of coffee from the caboose café or treat their dog to a bath before climbing aboard for the car ride home. Although Marymoor delivers a top-notch experience, it is open to the public with just a \$1 parking fee. The sheer number of dogs of all shapes and sizes in this space was impressive and speaks volumes about socialization of dogs and the irrelevance of breed.

Option C: Off-leash dogs with a permit and under voice/sight control are free to share recreational space with non-dog users where indicated in specified zones of the park.

Permits are available through classes provided by the city or parks. In this scenario, off-leash access with permit leaves the open space available for on-leash activities while allowing well-behaved dogs to enjoy off-leash play and socialization.

This solution addresses the root of most common issues — lack of education and training: issues that stem from a lack of understanding about responsible and safe dog ownership. There are cultural and geographical variances that should be taken into consideration. Some park and recreation facilities may have sensitive land preservation issues or local ordinances that can be integrated into the permitting.

One example is in Boulder, Colorado. The city provides free classes in sight and voice control, and the yearly permitting system makes for easier enforcement and sends a message to all park users about the importance of training and respect.

In short, the United States is “dogified.” Are you?

Beth A. Miller *is the CEO of Wagtown.*

Additional Resources

1. [Seattle Citizens for Off-Leash Areas.](#)
2. City of Seattle, WA., [Off Leash Areas Rules.](#)

3. Eckerman, C. (2017, September 3). Executive Director, Citizens for Off-Leash Areas (Seattle COLA). (B. C. Miller, Interviewer)
4. Moore, L. (2017, May 25). Senior Vice President, Corporate Strategic Services, PlayCore. (B. C. Miller, Interviewer)
5. Palacios, P. I. (2017, May 22). Director of Programs, Partnerships and Professional Development. (B. C. Miller, Interviewer) Chattanooga: PlayCore.
6. [PlayCore](#).
7. [UltraSite](#).
8. [Wagtown, Inc.](#) Where the Wag Happens.

Why Parks Should Go to the Dogs

November 2, 2018, Department, by Gina Mullins-Cohen

Editors Letter



Did you know studies have shown that owning a dog may lead to a healthier heart? Experts from institutions, such as Harvard Medical School, say there is growing scientific research that shows dog owners have a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease compared to people who don't own a canine. Perhaps it's because caring for our four-legged friends requires regular dog walks and playtime and, therefore, owners stay fit and active in the process. I mean, have you ever played fetch with a dog? Research also shows that having a dog in a household can lower stress levels in adults, as well as children.

And, because dogs offer so much joy to people — and clearly provide health benefits to their owners — doesn't it make sense for park agencies to help return the love by providing communities with parks and amenities designed especially for our canine companions? In

this month's cover story, "Designing and Managing Innovative Dog Parks," NRPA's Richard J. Dolesh explores how quickly dog parks are growing throughout the United States. Since 2009, the total number of dog parks has increased by 40 percent, according to research by The Trust for Public Land.

This could be a great education topic for our 2019 annual conference in Baltimore, Maryland. Last month, some 8,000 park and rec professionals gathered in Indianapolis for the 2018 NRPA Annual Conference. *Parks & Recreation* magazine's Sonia Myrick and Suzanne Nathan provide a complete wrap-up of this year's conference on page 56, featuring noteworthy moments from the Opening General Session, the keynote presentation, as well as the story behind the visit to the exhibit hall by K-3 students from Nashville's Explore! Community School.

The NRPA Annual Conference, however, wasn't the only event to attract the park and recreation community in 2018. Innovation Labs have become must-attend gatherings in major cities across the country this year. Be sure to check out highlights from the Seattle Innovation Lab on page 62. The conference theme, "#Winning: The Art of Getting Voters to Open Their Wallets for Parks," featured education sessions, panel discussions, a keynote and workshop designed to provide strategies for developing effective political campaigns.

Lastly, congratulations to Sam Waldorf with Austin Parks and Recreation in Texas, who won our November cover contest. And, thanks to everyone else who submitted entries. We're sorry you weren't selected, but we make no bones about it...the competition was ruff!