

Designing and Managing Innovative Dog Parks

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“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.”