

PLANNING FOR DOGS: Exercise vs. Restraint

by Amy Souza

It's happening in communities across the nation. From Anchorage, Alaska, to Sarasota, Florida. On the coasts of Maine, Virginia, California. Even on the Hawaiian islands. Call it the dog park revolution. In cities big and small, dog owners are banding together to demand their fair share of public parks – places where Fido can run unhindered by a six-foot leash. Where Harry can sniff Sally. Where dogs can chase tennis balls, Frisbee discs, or each other.

Dogs and humans have an extensive history. Most scientists agree we began living together about 12,000 years ago. Some experts claim that our species evolved together, tying our destinies to each other for the long haul. In 2001, the American Veterinary Medical Association estimated that over 60 million dogs lived in 38 million households nationwide – in other words, nearly four out of every ten U.S. households owns at least one dog.

More and more people also see their canine companions as part of the family. Bookstores stock numerous guides on where to travel or play with dogs. And according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, pet owners will spend an estimated \$31 billion on their pets this year. (That number includes all pets, not just dogs.)

"Times are changing from where dogs are in the backyard to now, where they're true companion animals," says Laurie Kennedy, volunteer coordinator at the San Francisco SPCA and a member of San Francisco's Dog Advisory Committee.

Most cities and towns have de facto dog areas – parks, ball fields, or even schoolyards where dog owners let their pets run free during off hours, even

though they technically may be breaking city leash laws. With dwindling open space – and more people fighting to use it – conflicts over dog exercise areas grow.



"The time for revolution is now."

But Rex needs a place to run. According to the San Francisco SPCA, for dogs "exercise means exertion. It means running off-leash and playing with other dogs." Ironically, a City of Boston web page lists that city's leash laws under a heading titled, "Exercise restraint ... leash your dog!" Dog owners would argue just that: leashes restrain dogs and thus hinder exercise. Leashed dogs just don't burn off enough energy, even if walked for miles.

Like humans, canines are better behaved and more relaxed when well-exercised. Dogs also become better socialized when able to play with each other off leash. (Leashes may make a pooch feel constrained and confined, and thus more anxious when meeting other dogs.)

Off-leash parks offer neutral territory where dogs can romp, run, chase balls and wrestle, while their human companions watch and chat. "Everyone wants to have safe dogs in their community," says Kennedy. "Which means dogs that are

well-socialized to people and different situations."

But the most important benefit off-leash parks provide is community for dog owners, according to Emily Rosenberg, co-founder of the California Dog Owners Group (Cal-DOG). "That is often particularly important for young, stay-at-home parents, people who are single, and the elderly – basically people who are somewhat isolated in their lives," she says. "The dog park gives them a daily routine and a form of community." In fact, many owners consider a trip to the dog park as their main form of recreation.

BEGINNINGS

Leave it to Berkeley, California, to be ahead of a trend. That city built a small, fenced dog area in 1979. Today, Kathy Spangler, director of national partnerships at the National Recreation and Park Association, says that dog parks are in the top tier of the trend line for park and rec activities.

In the early 1990s, Spangler saw a television program in which a pet psychologist claimed the country had a burgeoning "latch-key pet problem."

"The notion was astounding to me, especially because that's when parks were dealing with latch-key kids," says Spangler. "It sent me on a journey to see what was happening in parks and recreation."

At the time, Spangler discovered about 20 communities that had built pet parks. She investigated each park and created the first published primer on building dog areas. The NRPA also advocated for dog parks. Spangler notes that dog owners see their pets as family members and that dogs get people outside and moving. "We wanted to embrace the

new family and use pets to increase recreation.” Today, Spangler says, there are well over 500 pet parks in the country.

SITE DESIGN

Off-leash areas come in many forms. Some are simply unfenced, shared open space. Others, like the dog area inside 640-acre Marymoor Park in Redmond, Washington, stretch on for tens of acres. Most times, however, when people talk about a “dog park” they mean a fenced, single-use area, usually contained within an existing park.

Not everyone supports such areas, however. The San Francisco SPCA took an official stance against that city’s dog park plan, stating that “single-use areas are less efficient and less suited to the needs of people and dogs than shared, multi-use areas are. Single-use areas are especially problematic for families. They make it all but impossible for people to enjoy the park with their children and their dogs at the same time.”

Even though many owners desire shared space for dogs, many municipalities, and even some dog owner groups, are averse to the idea of dogs running free without being surrounded by at least four-foot-high fencing. In Morris County, New Jersey, county park officials offered off-leash play hours in existing open space, but a dog owners’ group declined, saying they preferred a fenced area in order to prevent dogs from running away.

Bringing the Issue to the Table

Dog park planning can be a controversial issue, and shares similarities with another popular recreation amenity: skate parks. Like skate parks, off-leash areas often come about because of pressure from user groups. Dog parks also become an emotional issue and bring out many NIMBY nay sayers.

In places as disparate as Burlington, Vermont, and San Francisco, California, public meetings about the fate or planning of dog recreation areas can deteriorate into shouting matches and name calling. Nothing galvanizes people like something they’re passionate about. And on both sides of the dog park issue passions run deep.



JERRY MALMO

Seattle’s Golden Gardens off-leash area is one of eight such areas designated by the City Council. A dog owners’ group, Citizens for Off-Leash Areas (COLA), shares responsibility with the city’s park department for maintaining and monitoring these sites. More information, including a copy of the City-COLA agreement, is available at: <www.coladog.org>.

“Here in San Francisco people with dogs feel like they don’t really have influence in planning for parks,” says the SPCA’s Kennedy.

Dog owners can feel slighted by cities that regularly ignore requests for dog play areas, especially in light of the fact that their taxes pay for creation and maintenance of ball fields, skating rinks, soccer areas, and tennis courts.

Residents opposed to dog parks cite myriad reasons. In Minneapolis, a hearing on a new dog park site brought out fierce supporters as well as opponents. Detractors feared noise, dog bites, and increased car traffic. Neighbors of the park contended that their property values would plummet (one claimed they’d drop “immediately”). Some wondered why open space should get used for dogs. But park proponents argued the parks would actually reduce dog complaints, by providing fenced-in areas where dogs could run and socialize off-leash. Some also stressed how central dogs were to their lives. As one person put it: “My dogs are my kids. These parks are for me and my kids to

¹ For an interesting look at the increasingly important “emotional support” role dogs have taken on in our society (especially for the growing number of unmarried, divorced, or widowed persons), see Jon Katz’s *The New Work of Dogs: Tending to Life, Love, and Family* (Villard 2003).

play in. I receive great joy from watching them run.”¹

To keep meetings on task and less heated, Belinda Davis of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, recommends using a moderator. “It was important to find someone as objective as possible, someone without interest in dog parks one way or another.”

In Pinellas County, Florida, Assistant Park Director Joe Lupardus doesn’t remember much acrimony regarding his county’s six dog areas, called Paw Playgrounds, either during the planning stages or after. “They’re a very popular amenity,” he says. “We’ve had only a few complaints. But you can’t please everyone.”

The county’s new park department director had come from Sarasota where she had conceived of and implemented dog parks, so responding to Pinellas County citizens’ request for a dog play area didn’t seem daunting. “We already had a lot of dogs in parks, on leash. People wanted a place to play with them off leash,” Lupardus explains.

Each Paw Playground sits within a larger park – one even allows access to the Gulf of Mexico.

“We tried to locate them near existing parking areas and near potable water,” Lupardus says. “There are drinking

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Dogs of all sizes – and their people, too – enjoy Pinellas Count’s Paw Playgrounds. Note the dog cooling station, helpful to dogs in the hot Florida climate.

Estimating How Many Dogs Live in Your Town

The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends this formula:

- Multiply the number of households in your community by .361 (the average number of U.S. households with dogs). This gives you the estimated number of dog-owning households.
- Multiply that number by 1.6 to get a rough estimate of the number of dogs in your community.

The Ideal Dog Park is Designed to Include:

One acre or more surrounded by a 4’ to 6’ secure fence

- Double gated entry
- Shade & water
- Adequate drainage
- Parking close to site
- Grass area
- Covered garbage cans with regular trash removal
- Waste scooper stations
- Benches
- Wheelchair access
- Safe and accessible location
- Regular maintenance

– Courtesy of Marin Humane Society, Marin County, California

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fountains for humans and animals.” Handicapped-accessible sidewalks lead up to each facility, and each playground is divided into two areas: one for large dogs and one for smaller dogs. “That was a recommendation we heard,” Lupardus says. “It helps to have an area where smaller dogs can go, so owners aren’t concerned that a small dog will get trampled by a larger dog, even if they’re just playing.”

The small dog areas are also good for owners who have elderly canines, Lupardus notes. “They still want to get out.”

Pinellas County has 932,000 residents and around 114,000 dogs. “We’re the most densely populated county in Florida, with 3,000 people per square mile,” says Lupardus. “A lot of people live in apartments, condos, or mobile home parks, without backyards. This gives them an opportunity where they can run their dogs. Also, it’s a place where people can socialize and get to know the other people there.”

Costs

Of course, new amenities require funding. CalDOG’s Rosenberg says off-leash parks can cost from \$100 to \$100,000, though she estimates the average fenced-in areas costs around \$20,000. “It depends what cities want and what government is going to give,” she says. “You can have a facility that satisfies people for the cost of a fence and some signs.”

What she doesn’t like to see are communities that decide, “we can’t afford to give you landscaping or lighting or benches, therefore you get nothing.”

Pinellas County’s six Paw Playgrounds ranged in cost from \$21,000 to \$54,000. “The lion’s share of those costs is fencing,” says Lupardus.

While the money came from the county parks’ capital improvement budget, non-county residents are allowed to use the areas, as well. The county is currently seeking corporate sponsors to supply dog waste bags.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a \$1

increase in dog licensing fees was supposed to pay for the creation and maintenance of four dog parks. Only two have been built so far, however, and this spring, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* noted that the increased revenue had, in fact, gone to pay the salary for an additional worker to handle dog license requests.

Some communities, like Minneapolis, require park users to purchase yearly off-leash permits in addition to dog licenses. Permit fees are used to pay for maintenance for the city’s four current dog areas. Minneapolis residents pay \$25 for the first dog and \$15 for each additional dog. Non-residents pay \$50 and \$30, respectively.

Dog groups often raise funds themselves, as well. Some incorporate as 501c3 non profits to receive donations, and many groups hold yearly fundraisers. In Poway, California, dog owners raised nearly \$15,000 to add lighting to their 1.75-acre dog park. In addition, dog groups often organize volunteer clean-up and maintenance efforts, which may reduce maintenance costs.

Waste Disposal

One of the major concerns raised about dogs – whether they’re on leash or off – is their waste. It can harbor bacteria, it smells, and no one likes stepping in it. In some cities, pet droppings have also been implicated as a source of water pollution. Dog waste, as well as that from all warm-blooded creatures including humans, cows, and birds, can leech E. coli into water. In a watershed area, waste runoff can cause bacteria to rise to unacceptable levels.

In Northern Virginia, six dog parks sit within the Four Mile Run watershed. The watershed extends approximately 20 square miles throughout the urban areas of Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax County, and Falls Church, and feeds into the Potomac and, ultimately, Chesapeake Bay. Keeping the watershed as pollution free as possible is one of the goals of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, the planning district for that part of the state.

A DNA source tracking project

showed that 13 percent of the fecal coliform in the water came from canine sources (compared to 19 percent from human waste). The rest of the bacteria came from wildlife, such as birds and raccoons. A new clean-up plan aims at reducing or eliminating controllable pollution sources, namely human and dog. "Our ultimate goal is to de-list Four Mile Run [from the state's Impaired Water List]," says Bill Hicks, the Regional Commission's Four Mile Run Program Administrator. "We're focusing on pollution prevention measures, the ones that are controllable."

Hicks contends that dog parks already represent best management practices because of dog owner peer pressure and the educated users who frequent the parks. The plan includes an outreach campaign aimed at dog owners, which stresses the importance of picking up waste.

The fact remains, however, that some irresponsible owners simply don't pick



Dogs even find a bit of room to run in the heart of Manhattan, New York.

up after their dogs, whether the pet is on leash or off. San Francisco has implemented a new \$317 fine for people who don't pick up after their dogs, while New York City charges offenders \$100. But pooper scooper laws can be hard to enforce. Your best bet to reducing poop problems (besides providing disposal bags and waste cans) is to cultivate and

encourage a strong dog owners group. Owners often police each other, and many, like San Francisco's SFDOG, schedule regular clean-ups at city parks (where they often clean up more than just dog waste).

Legal Implications

One issue that gives planners pause is the thought of liability. What happens if a dog bites a person or another dog?

"Planners concerned about risk should review the accident reports for other public facilities such as pools and sports fields where serious accidents, and even drowning deaths, are not reasons to eliminate the activity from the public services," says Emily Rosenberg.

The NRPA's Spangler notes that dog areas represent fewer liability concerns than skateboard parks, and also meet the needs of a larger community of people. "By virtue of the trendline from 20 to 500 parks in a decade, it seems like the associated risk is not an overwhelming one," Spangler says. And, she adds, "There are not a lot of unintended outcomes, and that's a good thing." But as with many issues that raise liability concerns, it makes sense to involve your city or county attorney in early discussions. ♦

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Online Comments:

"I am a land use planner and attorney, and also an elected member of San Diego's Centre City Advisory Committee (CCAC), the community planning group for a 1500-acre downtown redevelopment area. In anticipation of thousands of new downtown residents, many of whom will have dogs, CCAC formed a Subcommittee to plan how to accommodate the growing dog population.

Our first public meeting was packed with dog owners who wanted to have off-leash hours for Pantoja Park, a small urban park. The City Park and Recreation Department agreed to mail out a survey to 800 residents living in five housing developments near the park, asking if they favored off-leash hours. The results were: 71 Yes, 123 No, and 5 No Opinion.

Before the survey was done, emotions were very high in the neighborhood. As it turned out, the legitimacy of the survey quieted both sides. The dog owners felt they had not done a good enough job of presenting their case and getting people to vote for the proposal. The opponents were satisfied when the CCAC voted not to pursue the proposal."

— Ann Fathy, AICP, San Diego, California [Ms. Fathy has agreed to answer any questions from PCJ readers; her email is: afathy@cox.net]

"Our dog park [in Prescott, Arizona] cost about \$25,000. It is the most popular single venue park in Prescott with the possible exception of the Golf Course. When I moved to Arizona from California five years ago there were two dog parks in all of Arizona. Now I know of at least 20... The City of Glendale, Arizona, built a dog park in a park located within a residential neighborhood. I am impressed with how close it has drawn the neighbors together on warm summer nights. People from eight to eighty sitting out with their dogs and talking to each other. The article is right that dog parks are about people with dogs, not just dogs."

— Glen Wright, Prescott, Arizona

"As the Albuquerque area becomes more built out, having doggie play areas that keep animals safe from intense traffic becomes more important. The undeveloped areas near the metropolitan area, long a favorite place to allow dogs to scare up jack rabbits, are disappearing rapidly. Most municipalities and even metro counties have leash laws, that some people abide by and others ignore. This presents many difficulties, and angry exchanges, where the leashed and unleashed interface."

— Cynthia C. Tidwell, Director of Planning and Zoning, Village of Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, New Mexico