

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

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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.